UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

AN INTERPRETIVE INQUIRY INTO STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF LEARNING

BY

JOHN ROGER PROCTOR

©

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

SPRING, 2001

National Library
of Canada

Acquisitions and
Bibliographic Services

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada

Acquisitions et
services bibliographiques

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence

Our file Notre référence

The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-60336-9

Canada

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

LIBRARY RELEASE FORM

NAME OF AUTHOR: JOHN ROGER PROCTOR

TITLE OF THESIS: AN INTERPRETIVE INQUIRY INTO STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF LEARNING

DEGREE: DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

YEAR THIS DEGREE GRANTED: 2001

Permission is hereby granted to THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA library to reproduce single copies of this thesis and to lend or sell such copies for private, scholarly, or scientific research purposes only.

The author reserves all other publication rights in association with the copyright in the thesis, and, except as hereinbefore provided, neither the thesis nor any substantial portion thereof may be printed or otherwise reproduced in any material form without the author's prior written permission.

PERMANENT ADDRESS:

7850 Jasper Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta
Canada, T5H 3R9

DATE: Jan. 16/2001

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance, a thesis entitled AN INTERPRETIVE INQUIRY INTO STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF LEARNING submitted by John Roger Proctor in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Grace Malicky
G. Malicky, Supervisor

John Ellis
J. Ellis

Carol Leroy
C. Leroy

W. G. Maynes
W. Maynes

Phillips
L. Phillips

M. Hunsberger, External Examiner

Date: Jan 16 /2001

Dedication

To three very special people who reveal
to me what life is really all about.

My Grandchildren:

Chad John Proctor, you have shown me that anything and everything is possible if you believe strongly enough and are willing to strive to your utmost.

David Leigh Proctor, you have shown me what dedication and determination looks like and I thank you for ensuring that we will always have music in our family.

James Ronald Proctor, your kind heart, your exuberant love of learning, and your ability to be always in the moment are truly inspiring.

ABSTRACT

In the main, research in education has been, and continues to be focused on defining what does or doesn't work in educational practice and explaining how such practice works or doesn't. In the majority of this research, the focal points have been the school and the classroom, with particular attention being paid to teachers' actions and activities, and how their teaching methods and practices affect student learning. Within such research traditions, researchers have tended to view children as the "objects" of instruction or teaching, and not as learning subjects in their own right. Seldom have the meanings and understandings that children attach to their learning and how it takes place been the central concern of educational research.

A review of the relatively small body of research that has investigated children's views of learning in school indicates that there are often substantial differences between children's perspectives and those adultcentric depictions of learning developed by theorists and curriculum developers which are translated into the mandated programs that teachers are required to enact in their classrooms. This inquiry was based on the assumption that student learning, in its many and diverse formulations remains the primary goal toward which all aspects of education work, and it was derived substantially from the researcher's sense that students' perceptions of learning could add a critical dimension to our understanding of the ways in which school-based notions of learning are actualized in students' lives.

In order to investigate this practical concern, I conducted an interpretive inquiry that proceeded in two five-month phases. During these periods, data were gathered by observing, interviewing and conversing with eight students (4 girls and 4 boys) in a Grade 6 classroom in an inner-city school. The data generated were analyzed for key themes relating to how the students perceived themselves as learners, how they responded to, and interpreted, their personal learning experiences in the classroom, and ultimately how they perceived learning.

Each of the students interpreted his or her learning experiences in the classroom from a unique and particular perspective, and their views were strongly influenced by the degree to which they felt themselves to be in control of their situation. In general, some of the commonly held adultcentric assumptions about the way learning is most efficaciously facilitated in classrooms, proved to be misplaced, as the students' interpretations of learning and how it was supposed to proceed often interfered directly in their attainment of mandated curriculum outcomes.

The findings of the inquiry are stated in terms of five reflective conclusions and they centre on the broad themes that emerged from the data. The inquiry revealed that the perspectives of students can cast new light on the ways that learning in classrooms works. It was also apparent that quite often students could find little purpose for learning in the classroom and they often experienced debilitating forms of confusion that interfered directly with their ability to learn. A third conclusion related to the ways the metaphor of learning as work directly affected how students approached their learning and their understanding of what it meant to learn. The inquiry also revealed how external control mechanisms, particularly the prescribed curriculum and mandated government testing programs, contributed to both the teacher's frustration and the students' confusion.

The final conclusion indicates that for many of the students in this particular classroom at this time, the learning problems that they displayed were iatrogenic in that they induced inadvertently by their past and present learning experiences within classrooms. I suggest that by identifying the possible contradictions between theoretical views of the way that learning should proceed and the views held by students, educators may aim toward the creation of a more efficacious match, one that may result in students' encounters with learning being more personally and communally rewarding. I suggest that mindful approaches that present teaching and learning from an ecological perspective can lead to the development of students as active interpretive inquirers who see themselves as retaining control and responsibility for their own learning.

Acknowledgements

I am sincerely grateful to the staff and principal of the school in which I conducted my research inquiry. I thank you for including me in your community. The students who shared their perspectives with me will always retain a favored and special place in my memory. I thank them for their honesty and enthusiasm and for sharing with me their understanding of learning in school. I have deep admiration for the teacher in my study, Mr. T. Your openness and willingness to accept me without question allowed me to see aspects of my teaching that I had not previously considered. It is my wish that every teacher sees their students and themselves in new ways because of your willingness to share your classroom with me.

To my supervisor and mentor, Dr. Grace Malicky, I am forever in your debt. I was indeed fortunate that you accepted me as your student. You were always there to support and guide, to listen, to encourage and keep me on track, and for this I thank you.

Dr. Julia Ellis, you were the one who helped me to define what I wanted to do and you showed me a way that I could get there. You were always available and your ability to listen with empathy and insight is a special gift you shared with me. More than anything you made me constantly define what I was supposed to be about. I became a researcher because of you.

Dr. Linda Phillips, our conversations re-energized me when I was running low, your insightful questions and prompts forced me to focus, and your sense of humor kept me vitalized. You contributed so much to my understanding of what it takes to be a scholar.

Dr. Carol Leroy, your willingness to take time to talk with me about our common interests helped me to more clearly understand what my research was telling me. Your considered response to my proposal enabled me to focus my efforts in fruitful directions, and your constructive feedback and ongoing support showed me what it means to be a part of a learning community.

To my friend Dr. Bill Maynes, my sincere thanks for your scholarship and for truly caring about my research. You have such a deft and insightful touch and your responses to my thesis draft contributed greatly to its clarity and effectiveness.

I am grateful to my external examiner, Dr. Margaret Hunsberger for her scholarly review and response to my thesis. Her comments and questions revealed to me dimensions of my research that I had not previously considered. I thank her for inviting me to extend my thinking and for honouring me with her response to my work.

In addition to those immediately involved in my research and the presentation of my thesis, I also acknowledge my teachers, my fellow graduate students, and the undergraduate students I have taught at the University of Alberta. Each of you has constantly extended my awareness of the possible. May you continue to share your inspiration and wisdom.

Above all, I thank my family for their understanding and unconditional support. My son Marty and his wife, Pam, thank you for continually reminding me of the importance of my work. My son, Bradley, you are my inspiration, and knowing that you are on my side makes everything possible. My friend and partner, Gayle, your forbearance, tolerance and patience is unlimited. Your unflagging support has sustained me throughout this enterprise. I love you all very much.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

Page
A PRACTICAL CONCERN 1

Overview of the Thesis 1
Background to the Inquiry 4
Underlying Assumptions of the Inquiry 10
Overview of the Inquiry 11

CHAPTER TWO

ENTERING THE HERMEUTIC CIRCLE 13

The Interpretive Framework for the Inquiry 13
The need for foreclosure 15
Tracing my theoretical roots 18
Identifying my epistemological roots 21
    The fragmentation of thinking 21
    Reliance on empirical evidence 22
    The subject-object dichotomy 22
Defining my personal perspective 24
Connecting my foreclosure with my practical concern 26
The value of the inquiry 26
Summary 28

CHAPTER THREE

DEVELOPING A WORKING PERSPECTIVE:
THE THEORERICAL AND RESEARCH CONTEXT 30

Theoretical Perspectives on Learning 30
Children's Perceptions of Learning 35
Implications for the Inquiry 41
Summary 41

CHAPTER FOUR

DEVELOPING A WORKING PERSPECTIVE:
GAINING ENTRY INTO THE STUDENTS' WORLDS 43

Exploring Contexts: The Familiarization Phase of the Inquiry 44
    Orientation to the site 44
    Defining my role as a researcher 47
        The videocamera 48
        The playgoer 49

        The evaluator 49
        The subjective inquirer 49
Gaining Entry into the Students' Worlds 50
    Moving in sideways 55
Developing Focussing Questions 57
Exploring Children's Response-abilities 59
Summary 61

CHAPTER FIVE

CONDUCTING THE INQUIRY 62

The Research Setting 64
    The school 64
    Support for learning in the school 68
Data Generation 69
    Classroom observations 70
    Field jottings and notes 70
    Group discussions 71
    Interviews/Conversations 72
    The researcher's reflective journal and peer debriefing 75
Analysis of the Data 76
Summary 79

CHAPTER SIX

THE INTERPRETIVE ACCOUNT PART A: THE STUDENTS 80

The School as a Backdrop to the Inquiry 81
Classifying the Students' Responses to Classroom Activities 82
    Educational resilience 82
The High Personal Agency Students 85
    Jonathon 85
    Marion 87
    Keith 88
    Gerri 89
The Low Personal Agency Students 91
    Lina 91
    Nadia and Andy 93
    Nadia 93
    Andy 95
    Arthur 98
The students' Responses to Their School Experiences 100
The Teacher's Role in the Inquiry 106

Summary 108

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE INTERPRETIVE ACCOUNT PART B: THE STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT WITH LEARNING 109

Learning Through Interaction 110
Learning by Listening and Attending 120
Learning as Remembering 124
Learning as Situated in Classroom Procedures and Routines 129
Discussion: Some Preliminary Implications 135
    Students as "highly effective" learners 136
Summary 140

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE INTERPRETIVE ACCOUNT PART C: THE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF LEARNING 141

The trivialization of learning 142
    The influence of mandated achievement testing programs 143
    The students' view of writing 146
    Learning as "trivial pursuit" 152
    Learning as work 154
Summary and Conclusion 159

CHAPTER NINE

A REPORT OF THE RESEARCHER'S LEARNING 161

Reflective conclusion 1 164
Reflective conclusion 2 167
Reflective conclusion 3 174
Reflective conclusion 4 178
Reflective conclusion 5 182
Identifying the Contradictions 186
Estimating the Costs 187
A Response: Mindful Teaching and Learning 192
Conclusion 195
Final Thoughts 198
A Personal Reflection 199

REFERENCES 201

APPENDICES 213

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 Indicators of student resiliency 84

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1	Three orientations to teaching and learning	34
Figure 2	Summary of the research design	78

CHAPTER ONE

A PRACTICAL CONCERN

Introduction

The purpose for this interpretive inquiry was to gather students' personal perceptions of learning in school. It began with a practical concern (Ellis, 1998), one which was based on both my personal teaching experiences and on my reading of the literature related to learning in schools. In a general sense, my practical concern centred on the ways that schooling appears to fail children (Delpit, 1992; Holt, 1964, 1967; Healy, 1990; Illich, 1996), and the fact that students' perspectives on learning have tended to be overlooked and even discounted in traditional approaches to educational research.

Overview of the Thesis

Packer and Addison (1989) have suggested that conventional formats used for reporting research do not readily lend themselves to interpretive inquiry in that they fail to capture the cyclical or recursive nature of such research (Ellis, 1998). Valerie Janesick (1998) suggests that metaphorically, qualitative research design can be likened to procedures used by dancers, viz. warm up, floor exercises, cool down. She suggests that just as each stage of a dancer's routine contributes to the total effectiveness of the dance, so each stage of an inquiry is one that demands constant connected decision-making on the part of the researcher. She concludes, "Like the dancer who finds her center from the base of the spine and the connection between the spine and the body, the qualitative researcher is centered by a series of design decisions" (p. 39). This reflects the challenge in interpretive inquiry in that from the onset of the inquiry, originating questions may be replaced or modified, emerging notions may indicate new directions to be pursued, and fresh insights may prompt the researcher to direct energy in pursuing alternate references and sources (Graue & Walsh, 1998). The challenge facing the interpretive researcher is to capture this process in a coherent manner, one that matches the paradigm within which the research was conducted. One way of responding to this challenge is suggested by Packer and Addison (1985) in their description of the three broad phases of interpretive inquiry. They maintain that in an interpretive inquiry

> - The first phase is that of entering the hermeneutic circle in the right way: discovering an appropriate workable perspective from which interpretation can proceed.
> - The second is to conduct the inquiry within that perspective.
> - The third phase is one of critical reflection upon and evaluation of the interpretive account that is the outcome of the inquiry (p. 3)

In this thesis, I use a modification of these suggested "phases" as an organizing framework. In this introductory chapter I outline the genesis of *My Practical Concern* and provide an overview of the nature of interpretive inquiry. I outline some of the challenges faced by the interpretive inquirer, and some of the ways that interpretive inquiry diverges from more traditional empirical research models. In addition, I provide the framework within which the inquiry was conducted and the reporting format that I felt was appropriate to my research paradigm.

In chapter 2, I discuss the process of *Entering the Hermeneutic Circle* and I present a rationale for the importance of foreclosure in providing a context for the inquiry. I then make apparent the connection between my foreclosure and my practical concern and I suggest the value of the inquiry, its promise, and some of the limitations and delimitations associated with generation and interpretation of the data.

In chapter 3, I explore some of the theoretical and philosophical perspectives that contributed to the development of my *Working Perspective*. In addition, I review some of the theoretical perspectives on learning that have underwritten teaching in schools and I contrast them with research that has reported children's perceptions of learning in school.

Chapter 4 describes the ways in which I expanded my *Working Perspective* by reviewing some of the challenges associated with inquiry that has children as its major participants. I outline the familiarization phase of the inquiry during which I focussed on orientating myself to the site, exploring the utility of the data generating strategies I had developed, and I provide some specific focussing questions related to the students' perspectives on learning that guided my interactions during data generation.

The fifth chapter, *Conducting the Inquiry,* provides an overview of the school setting in which the inquiry was conducted, the methods used to generate data, and the categories used to analyze the data.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 present the *Interpretive Account* as three overlapping and interrelated perspectives. Chapter 6 provides an individual profile for each of the eight student-participants, which focuses principally on their responses to their classroom experiences. Chapter 7 contains a description and analysis of the students' engagement with and responses to specific classroom learning activities and situations. Chapter 8 discusses the students' perspectives on learning and I discuss some of the ways that their perspectives affected their ability to learn in the classroom.

In Chapter 9, I provide a *Report of the Researcher's Learning* in the form of five reflective conclusions and I discuss the implications that these conclusions have for schooling in general and for classroom instruction in particular. I close with some reflections on the personal significance of the study

Background to the Inquiry

> Many practices, policies, folk wisdoms, and accepted myths ... [in education]... do not work, and so research is needed to uncover hidden meanings, the subjective interpretations, the voices of the powerless. (Manning, 1997, p. 196)

PUBLIC EDUCATION WORKS!
The Alberta Teachers Association (ATA)

Teachers, functioning within a classroom reality, usually engage in a form of interpretive inquiry when they examine situations that are immediately relevant and puzzling (Ellis, 1998). They may engage in a form of practical action research (Carson & Sumara, 1997) designed specifically to help them understand their students' perspectives and understandings, in order that they may respond to their students' learning needs appropriately. In addition, through the construction of personal narratives of experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1993) and the process of reflection (Schön, 1987, 1991), they may come to understand themselves and their situation more completely. Teacher-researchers, because they are freed of the day-to-day constraints and concerns of classroom teaching, are uniquely situated to contribute additional dimensions to such inquiries. One such dimension emerges from my awareness that, despite the claim advanced by the Alberta Teachers Association, many aspects of schooling whether they be public or private, do not work propitiously for certain individual and groups of students. If we, in a *prima facie* sense, concede that the "work" of schools is to help students learn, the guiding question for the inquiry I conducted was, "How do students perceive their learning in school?"

To begin this discussion, it is important to note that the ways schooling works can be viewed from several perspectives and depicted in any number of ways. One of the aims of the Alberta Teachers Association, in coining the phrase "Public Education Works" was to draw attention to the fact that public education remains one of the bulwarks of an open and democratic society and that, in the association's estimation, there is an urgent political need to maintain and support a vibrant system of public education, and I am in total agreement with this contention. There is also little doubt that teachers and their professional associations are very aware that some aspects of education are not working and as a political entity, one of the major aims of the Association is to improve the quality of education for all students. It is against this acknowledgement that I enter the contention that, although the process of education that is conducted in formal setting does work in any number of ways for many students, for some students this is not the case.

Support for this contention may be derived from the fact that a great deal of effort has been expended on trying to find ways to "fix" education so that it works better (Allington & Walmsley, 1995). A somewhat cursory reading of the literature both past and current indicates that the vast majority of educational research into learning has been devoted to attempting to uncover teaching methods, practices, techniques and strategies that do, and conversely, don't work, i.e. produce the necessary or requisite student learning outcomes (Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Manning, 1997), and to suggesting ways and means for fixing these practices so that they may work more effectively (Caine & Caine, 1994, 1997; Knapp & Associates, 1995; Strahan, 1997).

In attempting to uncover what is working and not working in instructional practice designed to promote learning, research has traditionally been driven by positivistic paradigms. Researchers such as Christensen and James (2000), Cook-Gumperz, Corsaro, and Streeck (1986), and Greig and Taylor (1999) have suggested that those working within this paradigm have tended to view and represent children as the objects of teaching rather than as the subjects of learning. Allison James (1999) suggests that an alternative perspective on research with children is emerging and she notes,

> I have been attempting, along with others in the sociology and social anthropology of childhood, to develop approaches which see children as social actors, as people with their own perspectives on the social world which may or may not reflect those of the adults with whom they engage. (p. 231)

Guba (1990) points out that research which has focused on finding objective indicators of learning has been conducted within a positivistic assumption that "there exists a reality *out there*, driven by immutable laws" (p. 19, *original emphasis*). Such research "reflect(s) positivistic notions of childhood as an objective, definable entity that researchers can come to know if only they perfect their measuring tools and adequately control for interfering variables" (Hatch, 1995, p. 121). In essence, the focus of such research has been on attempting to uncover quantitative depictions of student learning that would allow schools to most effectively manage and manipulate the environmental factors that impinge upon it. However, as John Smith (1992) points out "… one could do an immense amount of counting, tabulating and testing of children in a classroom and still not have the vaguest idea what is going on with those children" (p. 102). In addition, much research with children has been conducted within a limited conceptualization of children and childhood. In a critique of those research approaches that have "dominated the discourse on young children" Graue and Walsh (1995) note the

> … dominance of a particular psychological perspective in which researchers see children as either windows onto universal psychological laws or as indicators of treatment effects. In both cases, the children themselves are simply instruments. The quest has not been to understand children but to pursue the lofty academic goal of the universal law and the ultimate treatment. (p. 136)

Such (re)searches that are dedicated principally to finding ways to efficiently and effectively manipulate the learning and teaching environment have, in the majority of cases, not produced the promised result of providing an immutable basis for teaching and learning in schools (Scott & Usher, 1999). The apparent inability of the quantitative empiricist research paradigm to produce substantive results (Smith, 1993a) has led some researchers to move beyond the assumptions of the positivistic paradigm to more qualitatively oriented research efforts aimed at uncovering the meanings and understandings that schooling has for the participants (Saltz, 1992; Dale, 1996).

One strand of research that has investigated the underlying "meanings" of schooling has indicated that although schooling appears to be overtly dedicated to children's learning, it implicitly serves the political agenda of the power elite in society (Apple & King, 1977; Giroux, 1983). The findings of this research suggest that both contemporary and traditional conceptions of education, for a number of identifiable reasons, do not work in a propitious way for students (Anyon, 1981; Delpit, 1993; Heath, 1983). In addition, there is an emerging body of research which indicates that, despite all the tinkering with surface features and variables, traditional models of schooling respond very inadequately to the needs of involuntary minorities (Rist, 1978; Ogbu, 1978; Pianta & Walsh, 1996), and further, that certain groups such as the poor are marginalized in ways that do not work in their best interests (Hesch, 2000; Maynes, 1996, 1990). Some critics go as far as suggesting that there are simply no aspects of schooling that "work" (Holt, 1964; Illich, 1996) The claims made by this decidedly anti-schooling group are often couched in strident rhetoric as in Matt Hern's conclusion that

> The abject failure of monopoly, state-controlled, compulsory schooling is evident to anyone who looks. The nightmare of schooling is costing our kids, our families, and communities dearly in every way. Schools ... demand that our kids spend twelve (twelve!) years of their natural youth in often morbidly depressing and oppressive environments, and pour the energies of thousands upon thousands of eager teachers into demeaning and senseless classroom situations. (1996, p.1)

Perhaps, one of these "abject failures" is evident in the singular lack of appeal that schooling has for some children. It is perhaps pointing out the obvious to note that for as long as the school-as-institution has existed, it has represented a traumatic and eminently forgettable experience for certain groups of students. As Peter Woods (1990) notes,

> Pupils have likened schools to "prison", "concentration camp", "a battleground". They experience demands and pressures that they perceive as running counter to their interests. Leaving school is like escaping from constrained and hostile surroundings into the free and real world, and beginning life in earnest. (p. vii)

From a personal perspective, the claim that many aspects of school don't work is supported by my teaching experiences which indicate that, although I was considered a successful teacher, some of my students didn't appear to learn what I intended for them, and additionally, that even when I considered that my students were learning I was never entirely sure what it was. In addition, my experience tells me that I spent a considerable portion of my teaching career designing, implementing, evaluating, critiquing, revising and re-introducing classroom practices that produced somewhat limited results; and my reading of the literature informs me that many of my colleagues at all levels of the educational enterprise are continuously engaged in a similar process.

One tentative conclusion that may be drawn from the preceding discussion is that schooling does indeed work in a variety of ways for and upon students. However, research that has focussed principally on the effects of teaching may have limited our understanding of why schooling does not work for many students. In fact, Kathleen Manning's observation that opened this section strongly suggests that traditional research in matters related to education has sometimes been focused in somewhat unproductive directions. She suggests that such research may have contributed to the generation of many of the "practices, policies, folk wisdoms, and … myths" that continue to permeate a great deal of current educational thinking. Manning's (1997) perspective has been echoed in a variety of ways and contexts (see Bowers & Flinders, 1990; Cherryholmes, 1988; Smith, 1993a). Thus, if traditional research is seen as only partially and somewhat inadequately revealing the ways in which schooling works for children, what kind of research enables one to "uncover hidden meanings, the subjective interpretations, the voices of the powerless?" Max van Manen (1993) in his discussion of pedagogy in *The Tact of Teaching* observes,

> Most books on education … direct themselves to the adults, to the parents or to the teachers, and not to the children. They preoccupy themselves with the question of how educators [should] think, act, feel, and interact with children. … [T]his emphasis on the adult fails to consider how particular situations appear from the child's point of view, how the child experiences his or her world at home, at school, and in the community. From a pedagogical perspective the most important question is always, "How does the child experience this situation, relationship, or event? (p. 11)

In some respects van Manen's observation responds to and perhaps serves to provide a partial solution to the challenge laid out by Kathleen Manning. In fact, one might be tempted to draw the conclusion that one of the reasons why many educational practices "do not work" may be that they are based almost entirely on an adultcentric view of the world and how learning *should* or *ought to* take place (Graue & Walsh, 2000; van Manen, 1993). For any number of reasons, children's views and perspectives have not been a prominent feature of discussions about learning in educational circles (Hendrick, 2000; Nuthall, 1999a; Scott, 2000; Waksler, 1996). Thus, it would appear that asking the principal players, the learners themselves, how they think about their own learning might provide educators with insights into how various theoretical insights and judgements about learning are played out in children's daily classroom experiences. Such a perspective has the potential to add another dimension to our understanding of the ways that education does and perhaps, does not work. Thus, in practical terms, this interpretive inquiry set out to garner students' perceptions of learning with the aim of producing an interpretive account of their perceptions. The following section sets out the assumptions under which the inquiry proceeded and the framework within which the inquiry was conducted.

Underlying Assumptions of the Inquiry

Hatch (1995) suggests that researchers who engage in interpretive inquiries such as this one need to state the assumptions under which the research proceeds. He points out "… unexamined assumptions can lead to research that lacks logical consistency at the least and is of questionable integrity at the worst" (p. 121). The nature of these assumptions can be drawn from the growing body of discussion related to the field of interpretive inquiry (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, 1998; Corsaro, 1997; Ellis, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morse, 1994; Packer & Addison; 1989; Polkinghorne, 1983, 1988; Yin, 1994). A summary of the underlying assumptions of this inquiry follows.

- The meanings of particular events and situations are best determined by attending to how those who are direct participants in those situations experience and construct their understandings.
- Research questions and methods for answering them arise from the practical concern of the researcher.
- The research data are collected in as natural a setting as possible.
- Research into the meaning that situations hold for participants can yield only partial interpretations of the phenomena.
- The goal of interpretive research is not control and predictability but the creation of the most informed and sophisticated understanding of the phenomena as is possible under the circumstances.
- The researcher recognizes and acknowledges those particular personal prejudices (Gadamer, 1990) that contribute to and impinge upon her or his interpretation of the data that are gathered.
- The final accounting reflects as closely and coherently as possible the participants' perspectives and includes an accounting of the researcher's own growth in understanding.
- The data are analyzed inductively and the conclusions that emerge from the data represent the most adequate interpretive account.

- The procedural choices are not constrained by a desire for objectivity; they are choices of a moral nature (Smith, 1992). Thus, interpretive inquirers act in certain ways not because they are required to conform to certain paradigmatic specifications, but because of the need to act in a correct manner both in terms of fidelity to the situation and as a moral obligation to the participants and to themselves.

Based on the foregoing assumptions, it becomes apparent that the conduct and reporting of an interpretive inquiry may depart substantially from traditional empirical models of research in a number of ways. For example, issues pertaining to the validity or trustworthiness (Guba, 1981) of the research rest much more on the credibility of the researcher than on the method used or the degree to which research variables can be controlled and manipulated. Similarly, because the interpretive researcher is seen as the primary research instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the description of the inquiry and the context in which it is conducted demands a different focus, one which begins by clearly detailing the understanding that the researcher brings to the inquiry and ends by situating the interpretation in this understanding. In addition, the procedures used to generate data are derived from the researcher's practical concern and are designed to produce as complete an interpretation as is possible and not to confirm or disconfirm initial hypotheses. Finally, although the research may have its genesis in a focussing question, additional questions are expected to emerge as data are collected (Morse, 1994), and it is expected that such uncoverings will, of necessity, form a substantial part of the final accounting.

Overview of the Inquiry

My practical concern with the way children viewed and experienced learning in schools prompted my initial entry into the hermeneutic circle (Packer & Addison, 1989; Smith, 1993b) and into the process of interpretive inquiry (both of which are discussed in further detail in Chapter 2). In practical terms this meant that, for an extended period of time, during 1998 and 1999, I became part of the lives of eight children (and, indirectly the lives of their teacher and their school) in a Grade six classroom located in the "inner-city" of a large urban school district in Alberta, Canada. The inquiry proceeded in two phases. During the first phase of the inquiry, the "familiarization" phase, I reacquainted myself with life in the elementary classroom and explored data generating possibilities. During the second phase I assiduously generated data (Graue & Walsh, 1998) by conversing with the students both formally and informally (Christensen & James, 2000; Seidman, 1998; Spradley, 1979), being present with and observing them during their regular classroom routines, and by constantly engaging in an ongoing reflective dialogue with myself and my supervisor (Boostrom, 1994; Graue & Walsh, 1996). Since the inception of the inquiry, I have been continuously immersed in data, circling about ideas, exploring possibilities, adopting new standpoints and perspectives, developing insights, forming questions and then questioning the questions, a process that reflects the recursive or spiraling nature of interpretive inquiry (Ellis, 1998; Smith, 1991). Ultimately, the account that emerged from the inquiry was informed by the views and perspectives of students on the one hand and on the other by the understandings and personal meanings that I have created through my experiences as both teacher and learner.

CHAPTER TWO

ENTERING THE HERMENEUTIC CIRCLE

> The contemporary situation is such that we now need to think loudly and publicly, not just about methods, outcomes, and applications, but about the research process itself; and to think in this way not after the event but during it.
> (Scott & Usher, 1999, p. 10)

Packer and Addison (1989) suggest that the first phase in interpretive inquiry is one that involves the researcher "entering the hermeneutic circle in the right way" (p. 30). It is important that in any discussion related to entering the "hermeneutic circle in the right way," one remains cognizant of Gadamer's caveat that "… the appropriate method for interpreting any phenomena could only be disclosed by the phenomena itself through a kind of Socratic dialogical engagement between question and phenomenon" (cited in Smith, 1991, p. 192). Such a dialogic engagement begins with the formulation of the researcher's practical concern and guiding question, and this may be considered the first step in entering the circle. The next step requires that the researcher situate the inquiry within an interpretive framework, to provide the researcher's theoretical context. The final step involves a consideration of the resources and contexts that are available and accessible within which appropriate data can be generated (Hatch, 1995).

The Interpretive Framework for the Inquiry

From a hermeneutic perspective, children's learning in classrooms may be viewed as an ecological enterprise that is irreducible to its component parts (Sumara & Davis, 1997). As Graue and Walsh (1998) observe,

> Doing research with children is as complex, rewarding, and messy as living and working with them. It takes a keen eye to their needs, rather than the needs of

> the research project. It requires attention to the special circumstances that allow children to show us their worlds. (p. 13)

Hermeneutic inquiry focuses on understanding the meanings of situations and events from the participants' perspectives (Smith, 1993b, 1992), which, in essence, involves attempting to find the answers to "hard" questions. This means that because hermeneutic inquiry is premised on the notion that there is no pre-existent reality "out there", no single correct meaning or knowledge waiting to be identified, examined and quantified, it lends itself to the investigation of questions that are of a more deeply personal nature. In a sense, such an inquiry is aimed at the development of a "practical philosophy" (Smith, 1991), a search for the understandings and situated meanings within the participants rather than without. Judith Singer (1993) provides a sense of this practical dimension when she asks,

> How do students learn? What facilitates or impedes learning? Of the myriad potentially important factors, which ones are most important? These questions, at once deceptively simple and perilously complex lie at the heart of much educational research. (p. 353)

Interpretive research responds to the questions that Singer asks by looking into possible answers at the source; by inquiring into and furnishing an account of the meanings that children make of their "learning" experiences in classrooms in particular, and schooling in general. In a sense, interpretive inquiry is dedicated toward interrupting the flow of conventionally accepted understandings and, in the process, to casting new light on familiar situations. In essence, it is research that aims at the "substitution of uncommon sense for the common sense of the past" (Saltz, 1992, p. 108). Saltz continues with this thought by pointing out "What we are talking about is a paradigm shift, a profoundly new way of looking at things" (p. 108). Thus, interpretive inquiry is not overtly dedicated to confirming or disconfirming pre-existent theoretical positions; rather it calls into question commonly accepted ways of thinking about learning and how it proceeds in classrooms. This means that the interpretive researcher is required to acknowledge predispositions, biases, and predilections that may need to be taken into account in the presentation of the interpretive account. As Hutchinson and Wilson (1994) point out, "… the philosophical roots of most of the varied qualitative methods encourage conceptualizing participants' perspectives rather than interpreting based on predetermined theoretical frameworks" (p. 310). Neither does interpretive inquiry seek to create theory (Seidman, 1998), although it may do so (Graue & Walsh, 2000). Instead, the research emphasis falls on interpretation and allowing the final product (the interpretive account) to "speak simply for itself" (Hutchinson & Wilson, 1994, p. 304). It seeks to present an understanding of people and their situations differently (Smith, 1992) by inquiring in depth (narrowly) and personally rather than broadly and anonymously. In David Smith's terms, "The aim of interpretation, it could be said, is not just another interpretation but human freedom, which finds its light, identity, and dignity in those brief moments when one's lived burdens can be shown to have their source in too limited a view of things" (1991, p. 189). Thus, interpretive inquiry is always situated within the interpretive framework of the researcher who consistently remains open to the possibility of uncovering ideas and insights that he or she may not have previously considered. In addition, the researcher accepts the assumption that "qualitative researchers, because they deal with individual persons face-to-face on a daily basis, are attuned to making decisions regarding ethical concerns, because this is part of life in the field" (Janesick, 1998, p. 40). From an ethical perspective, it is the research context and the researcher's sensitivity that ultimately dictate the conduct of the inquiry as well as the nature of the interpretations that develop within it and proceed from it. It is the nature of my personal interpretive framework that forms the next step in entering the circle and is detailed in the following section.

The Need for Foreclosure

A critical element of an inquiry conducted within a hermeneutic perspective is the "circular relationship between understanding and interpretation" (Packer &

Addison, 1989). This relationship has been termed the "hermeneutic circle," and this circle is underwritten by three themes: "the inherent creativity of interpretation, the pivotal role of language in human understanding, and the interplay of part and whole in the process of interpretation" (Schleiermacher, cited in Smith, 1991, p. 190). When entering the hermeneutic circle (Ellis, 1998) all of these themes bear consideration, with the third theme obligating the researcher to identify in some way how his or her "part" relates to the whole inquiry. In other words, the researcher's forestructure (Packer & Addison, 1989) needs to be identified and stated in the form of "existing preconceptions, preunderstandings or prejudices—including purposes, interests, and values…" (Ellis, 1998, p. 27). In addition, Packer and Addison suggest that there is a need for the researcher to present and acknowledge those life experiences that have lead up to the researcher's current interest in the topic of the inquiry.

All interpretation takes place within the "horizon" or the prejudices that the researcher brings to the situation (Gadamer, 1990). They cannot be ignored or avoided and they are essential to interpretation. As David Smith (1991) points out "We can only make sense of the world from within a particular 'horizon' which provides the starting point for our thoughts and actions" (p. 193). Thus, in any activity for which the proposed outcome is an interpretation or series of interpretations, there is the necessity for disclosure, for laying out, within the boundaries of conscious awareness, the extent of the researcher's current prejudices, thoughts, volitions, and reasoning. Thus, when I pose the question "How do children perceive learning in classrooms?", the question is based in part on the experiences I have had both in my own classroom and in part by my encounters with the views and perspectives of others garnered from the literature on this subject. In fact the more I can re-collect and put forward, the more encompassing will be my interpretation of the phenomena. The disclosure works in conjunction with the data that are gathered in the ongoing reflective interplay between part and whole. In essence, the foreclosure serves a number of purposes.

In the first place, it provides the interpretive framework within which the inquiry proceeds. It acknowledges that research cannot be value free (Gadamer, 1990). Janesick makes this point quite succinctly when she notes

> I would like to point out that qualitative researchers accept the fact that research is ideologically driven. There is no value-free or bias-free design. The qualitative researcher early on identifies his or her biases and articulates the ideology or conceptual frame for the study. By identifying one's biases, one can easily see where the questions that guide the study are crafted. (p. 41)

Essentially, the foreclosure serves to place the prejudices of the researcher front and centre and in the process asks the reader to reflect upon the account in terms of how well it meets the prior specifications laid out by the researcher. As Dale (1995) points out, "... the key criterion of validity in qualitative research is whether a reader, who adopts the same viewpoint as the researcher, can see the same things the researcher saw whether he or she agrees with it" (p. 317). In addition, as Janesick points out, the practical concern underlying the inquiry and the questions arising from it are historically contextualized for the reader.

In the second place, foreclosure provides a foundation of trust from which the researcher builds a valid case from the data, in the sense that the account captures as fully as possible the phenomena being researched. In many ways, the research can be considered trustworthy if it answers the question, "Do the findings of the research follow logically and consistently from the data and the interpretive framework within which they are derived" (Guba, 1981)?

Finally, the researcher also credentials him- or herself in this foreclosure. By presenting the depth and breadth of the interpretive framework, the researcher allows the reader to develop a sense of the competence or scholarship of the interpretation being considered in the inquiry. Ultimately, in the absence of external tests of validity, the trustworthiness of the account may depend more on the researcher's credibility than on any other factor (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Tracing My Theoretical Roots

My reading of, and interaction with, the current literature on language learning indicates that the search continues for "best ways or methods" to help children learn (Allington & Walmsley, 1995; Graves, van der Broek & Taylor, 1996; Watts, 1996). As an example of this focus, in the preface to their text *Teaching Reading in the 21st Century* (1998), Graves, Juel, and Graves note, "Over these (last) three decades, we have learned a tremendous amount about how to provide instruction and environments that support and nurture children's growing literacy" (p. xv). In fairness, I acknowledge that many current texts also recommend that instructional practices include the "need for teachers who care deeply about them [students] and who can inspire them with the confidence they need to face an uncertain future" (Jarolimek & Foster, 1997). In addition, some texts indicate the necessity for instructional practice to be based on solid theoretical and philosophical foundations (see for example, Bainbridge & Malicky, 2000).

When I reflect on my own career, as both teacher and researcher, I would place myself squarely in the "search for best practice" tradition. My primary concern over the years has been with creating and implementing programs, teaching practices, and methods that were both effective in terms of student learning and efficient in terms of teaching time and effort. When I returned to university, my initial intent was to uncover the theoretical and philosophical roots for the teaching practices that had evolved from my experiences as a teacher. In a sense, I was seeking a "clear" rationale for the conclusions I had developed as to how "best" to teach children. I felt that over the years, I had unearthed some personal "best methods" and I wanted to be reassured that I was in some way on the "right track."

When I started my doctoral program, I determined that my research should be guided by clearly thought out questions and lines of inquiry; after all, I was attempting to *prove* that the practical applications of my particular teaching-learning theory were "right" or "correct" or "effective". For example, in the early stages of my studies, my major intent was to show how the classroom instructional methods I had developed improved student reading comprehension. My projected research design was essentially experimental at this point (Smith, 1993a) and I felt that all I had to do was expose a group of students to my instructional program and then chart the improvement in their reading (relative, of course, to a control group). However, this perspective began to change. Gradually and somewhat grudgingly, I gave myself permission to deviate from a logical-empiricist perspective (Bowers & Flinders, 1990; Cherryholmes, 1988; Smith, 1993a), and I began to consider more phenomenological ways of viewing the world (van Manen, 1993). I then began to focus on "wondering about" rather than "proving" as the following "early in my studies" journal entry indicates:

> May, 1997
>
> I have often wondered about one of my oft-stated goals of instruction, the one that concerns making or helping children become "aware" of some aspect of learning; or, if they are already aware, making them more aware in some way. Thus, in my language instruction, I engaged my students in activities designed to help them to become "aware of the structure of stories" or I attempted to "increase their awareness of the conventions of written language." Current language research focuses on ways and means by which teachers can develop children's "phonemic awareness", the underlying assumption being that such awareness is a prerequisite to the children's ability to learn to read. I have always taken for granted that I knew what I meant by awareness, but now I wonder how it differs from knowing how.

Eventually, this line of thought led me to think of what I was "aware of" and, conversely, what I was "not aware of." From a hermeneutic perspective, certain aspects of this personal learning struggle make sense. As David Smith (1991) reminds us, "In educational terms the hermeneutic imagination throws open the challenge to inquire into what we mean when we use words like curriculum, research, and pedagogy" (p. 189), and I was eventually led to add "learning" to the list. In the past I suspect that my tendency was to challenge the meanings of these terms as they were used by others; my "meanings" for these terms being at all times somewhat sacrosanct. However, after a rather fortuitous conversation with Dr. Jean McNiff (1998) during which she challenged me to think about research as personal learning (rather than proving myself to be right or changing the practice of others), I found myself considering the blocks that I was consciously and sub-consciously setting up that interfered with my learning. This internal cross-examination challenged me to go beyond description and rationalization of my practice to a more critical articulation and examination of my personal principles, theories, biases and beliefs (Hoover, 1994; Kerka, 1996). I needed to reflect upon those unquestioned assumptions (Schön, 1987) that constituted my theory of the world (Smith, 1991) and provided the foundations for my teaching and learning. I sensed that these personal theories of myself in the world provided the underlying central themes or "transcendental signifieds" (Cherryholmes, 1988) that guided the scripts I created and played out in the classroom, as both learner and teacher.

So, after many years of trying to prove that I was right basically employing a logical-empiricist rationale (Smith, 1993a), I thought it might be useful to allow myself to develop an awareness of possibility; to open myself to a more flexible discovery of what was "out there" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This meant that I had to acknowledge that there was more to my universe than I was aware of, and secondly, I needed to remain open to emerging possibilities. However, in spite of these sterling intentions, my reflective journal notes generated during my courses that focussed on the "storied nature of experience" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1993), "tactful teaching" (van Manen, 1993), and "interpretive inquiry" (Ellis, 1998) reveal to me how challenging this was. I often found myself fighting my way through both the content and the conceptual and theoretical bases of these courses. In fact, I found many of the notions and assumptions underlying qualitative research in general to be quite contrary to the way in which I had traditionally viewed the world. Quite often, even though my expressed intent as a learner was to assume a non-judgmental stance or at least to be more open and receptive to new ideas, I found myself responding in almost the opposite fashion, critically rejecting the theories and experiences of others out of hand. Somehow, I felt I knew better, but I really wasn't too sure why I felt this way.

Identifying My Epistemological Roots

In an attempt to deal with the epistemological dilemma with which I was faced, I began to ask questions related to what it was that determined the standpoints (Novak, 1983) that themed my thinking and shaped how I "knew" what constituted effective learning. I began to look into the ways in which I contrived to support my claims to knowing what I did. Scott and Usher (1999) indicate "Epistemology has traditionally been concerned with what distinguishes different knowledge claims—specifically with what the criteria are that allow distinctions to be made between what is legitimately knowledge and what is simply opinion or belief (p. 11). For many people, this distinction may be challenging in the extreme for, according to Clark (1988), most people who are raised in the Western philosophical tradition develop a "mindset" that has three fundamental characteristics. He depicts them as the "fragmentation of thinking," "the reliance on empirical evidence," and "the division of the world into subject and object" (pp. 52-53). These essentially "technist" (Bowers & Flinders, 1990) ways of thinking create a mindset that dictates the way we view our world and the way we live in it. These three assumptions are briefly summarized.

The fragmentation of thinking.

When we view the world from a "fragmentation" perspective, we believe that all aspects of it can be reduced to the smallest component and analyzed in order to be understood. In a general sense, this thinking leads us to view the world as being composed of separate things that bear only accidental relationship to each other. From a teaching perspective, the fragmentation of curriculum into "subjects" that are taught independent of each other, mainly using textbooks, makes sense (Cherryholmes, 1988). Similarly, from within this perspective, learning to read can be conceived of as gradually gaining control over pieces of the language system, sounds, letters, words, with comprehension being the eventual goal (Binkley, Phillips & Norris, 1995). The major focus of teacher's time tends to fall more heavily on classroom management than on student learning (Bowers & Flinders, 1990).

Reliance on empirical evidence.

This essentially pragmatic view of reality maintains that only empirical evidence yields truth. In Clark's terms "Seeing is believing" rather than "believing is seeing" (1988, p. 53). Thus, only those learning and teaching behaviours that are observable and quantifiable really count (Smith, 1993). All behaviour is "the result of external forces impinging on the organism" (Clark, 1988, p. 49). Such thinking leads to behavioural notions, wherein teaching becomes a matter of manipulating the learning environment in order to create "ideal" learning conditions. The solution to children's learning problems lies in identifying "best practices" and encouraging teachers to change their practice to incorporate them (Watts, 1996).

The subject-object dichotomy.

According to Clark (1988), this characteristic of our mindset helps us to project a world that is clearly divided into subjects and objects, with people being the subjects and everything else in the world being the objects. Thus, by means of a rigorous application of the scientific method and analytic procedure, an objective reality can be determined and described. This thinking leads us in our teaching to place great trust in objective test results as being true indicators of our students' learning. For educational policy makers and the public in general this thesis leads to the belief that a mandated curriculum will ensure high achievement for all students. In classrooms, the notion that workbooks and step by step instructional sequences are the key to successful instruction (and subsequently learning) has a seductive appeal. Based on the dichotomy between subject and object, I.Q. tests are presumed to provide us with an accurate indication of a learner's intellectual possibilities.

Overall, it appears that these deep-seated culturally ingrained assumptions generally guide and direct our individual progress in the world. As Clark (1988) suggests these mindsets, which are derived almost entirely from Newtonian physics and a Cartesian worldview, not only provide the lens by which we see the world, they also lead us to constantly and consistently reproduce it. Millard (1997), in examining the ways that boys and girls are usually depicted as readers in schools, points out the effect that the 'habitus', a term created by Bourdieu (Millard, 1997), has upon the way we think and act. This 'habitus', she maintains, "creates in a sense, an unexamined or unquestioned common-sense, practical way of proceeding within any repeated social routine that rules out as extravagant or unconventional other kinds of behaviour" (p. 22). The habitus appears consistently within the metaphors that direct classroom teaching (Bowers & Flinders, 1990) and they often go unnoticed and unchallenged. As Scott and Usher (1999) speaking of researchers (but with perhaps equal application to teachers and students) point out, "Even when researchers are not conscious of working within the general parameters of positivism, the latter still exerts a powerful influence — an influence which considers reflexive questions to be both undesirable and unnecessary" (p. 9). Moreover, if and when we do question our assumptions, this culturally ingrained common sense view of the world, the habitus, may lead us to focus on unproductive (or even destructive) outcomes. As Clark (1988) points out, the question "How can we defend ourselves against the evil empire?" is of a significantly different type from "How can we create a climate of global cooperation?" (p. 55). I wonder, at this point how long I have been asking these less productive kinds of questions of myself and my practice (Crowley, 1989).

In a very real sense, foreclosure presents the practical, theoretical, and philosophical contexts within which the researcher conducts the research. The brief foreclosure I have provided indicates that my thinking is situated in very personal and social settings, which trace a path from positivistic thinking to more hermeneutic perspectives on teaching and learning. According to Scott and Usher "philosophical issues constitute what researchers 'silently think' about research" ... and, when they ask what do researchers silently think?" They conclude

> One possible answer is to do with the tendency to assume that research is simply a matter of following the right procedures or method. This assumption, however, needs to be questioned because it misleadingly portrays research as mechanistic and algorithmic. If we uncritically accept this portrayal, we forget that research is a social practice and that it is therefore both embedded and embodied. (1999, p. 10)

Defining My Personal Perspective

As I reflect upon some of my personal learning "theories", I can identify some of their epistemological and ontological underpinnings. Contained within them is the idea that what I knew was clear and specific. In my thinking, my knowledge was in some way universal, and it could be clearly articulated (Cherryholmes, 1988). Familiar echoes of structuralism (Gibson, 1984) and logical positivism (Smith, 1993a) flowed throughout my perspective. My worldview tended to be orderly, organized, and constrained. It often fitted into neat and logical categories. There was little room in my personal discourse for self-questioning or reflective examination (Schön, 1987). "Reality" was very clear to me and I could not understand why others could not see things the way I did. In this world there was little that was conditional and much that was absolute (Caine & Caine, 1997; Langer, 1997). In essence, these "theories" formed the backbone of my teaching-learning-life experience. They constituted critical components of my "identity kit" (Gee, 1989), of who and what I was as teacher, learner and person.

Perhaps my "theories" of "being in the world" (Smith, 1991) have softened over the years, and perhaps my teaching may be in many ways more insightful, responsive and enlightened depending, of course, upon the perspective or standpoint from which it is viewed (Novak, 1983). Perhaps, I have gradually learned to develop a new tactful sensitivity to the meanings of others (van Manen, 1993). However, even though I can identify many of my embedded notions of how teaching and learning should proceed, I still find it difficult to let go of many of them.

The point is that how I believe that teaching and learning take place is underwritten by a set of substantive theories of who and what I am and how I view my relationship to my world. For me, much of what constitutes these theories when viewed retrospectively, has a somewhat dogmatic and rigid appearance. James Gee (1989) has categorized these "saying (writing) - doing - being - valuing - believing combinations" (p.6) as "Discourses", and he defines a Discourse as "a sort of identity kit which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize" (p. 7). He further suggests that a Discourse cannot be taught. It is acquired, he suggests, by "enculturation into practices through scaffolded and supported interaction with people who have already mastered the discourse" (p. 7). Thus, students develop their primary discourse long before they come to school, and they continue to be immersed in this discourse during the time they attend school (Heath, 1983). Most often a student's primary Discourse plays a critical role in the ability of the student to acquire the secondary discourse required for success in school (Delpit, 1992). Following this line of reasoning, Pianta and Walsh (1996) arrive at a telling conclusion. They suggest that a child's success in school may be more dependent on the nature of the relationship between the discourse(s) the child brings to school and the required discourse of the school rather than the methods or practices employed by teachers in classrooms or the intellectual capabilities of the student. However clearly identifying and describing a particular student's Discourse may be problematic. As, Pianta and Walsh (1996) point out, "… for many African-American children, and other children from the nondominant culture, differences within the nondominant group on dimensions considered critical to school success are as great as they are between the nondominant and dominant cultures" (p. 44).

Connecting My Foreclosure with My Practical Concern

The foregoing discussion suggests that the students' Discourse(s) may have to be taken into account if teachers are to help them successfully attain the school's learning outcomes (Delpit, 1992). Moreover, it further suggests that when learning is viewed from an ecological perspective (Pianta & Walsh, 1996) the teacher's Discourse may also need to be taken into account. As Bowers and Flinders (1990) point out "[T]he student's growth ... is dependent on the teacher's possessing a sensitivity, awareness, and knowledge of cultures and communicating this in a manner that empowers students to make informed interpretations of the ecology of relationships that make up everyday life..." (p. 126). However, as important as the teacher's Discourse may be in the development of student learning, it is beyond the scope of this inquiry.

Thus, the inquiry was underwritten by my conclusion that the way students perceive themselves as learners, their notions of what constitutes learning, and the values that they place on school learning as an enterprise play a significant, and for many children, a critical role in their ability to succeed in school (Schommer & Walker, 1995; Schoenfeld, 1989). In addition, even though there is a distinct research trend in this direction (Christensen & James, 2000; Corsaro, 1997; Greig & Taylor, 1999), the role that students' Discourse(s) play in their learning has received somewhat cursory acknowledgement and attention by both researchers and practitioners in the past (Clandinin & Connelly, 1993; Fine & Sandstrom, 1988; Hudson-Ross, Cleary & Casey, 1993; Leroy, 1995).

The Value of the Inquiry

Can the views of students contribute toward a more complete and insightful understanding of what works and what doesn't in their learning? From any number of perspectives, the answer to this question is a fairly resounding "yes" (Anyon, 1980;

Sanders, 1996; Schoenfeld, 1989). What students think about learning in general (Pianta & Walsh, 1996), how they think they learn best (Hudson-Ross et al., 1993), how they think about the nature of knowledge and learning (Schommer & Walker, 1995), how they view themselves as learners (Hammersley, 1990), and how they view their possibilities for successful learning (Schoenfeld, 1989) appear to play a significant role in their eventual success in school. However, as Clandinin and Connelly (1993) conclude, "One of the most persistent of educational polemics is that of the sanctity of the individual child. However, with some noteworthy exceptions ... the study of what education is or means for individuals is mostly absent in scholarly discourse" (p. 262). Thus, given that most educational research efforts have been directed toward and focused on learning and the findings of such research have had a strong influence on all aspects of schooling (Greig & Taylor, 1999), it is apparent that students' perceptions of their own learning have the potential to enrich the understandings that educators already hold.

Ultimately, the value of the interpretive account is, of course, situated within the perspectives presented by the researcher and the interpretation placed on these perspectives by the reader. In a sense, the extent to which the study is "limited" is a co-creation of researcher and reader. Thus, to a certain extent, the reader of the account, not the presenter, must make decisions as to the nature and range of the limitations. Alan Peshkin (1993) points out that the basic question in interpretive research lies not in justification but in asking of the research "What is its generative promise?" (p. 23). He expands upon this idea in this way

> In response to what is perceived as unknown, known thinly, known uncertainly, or known wrongly, they ... [qualitative researchers] ... could have conducted many types of research. To qualitative researchers, what is to be learned does not invariably necessitate a particular study design involving theory, hypotheses, or generalization, though it may. It necessitates a judgement that leads them to decide what research designs they should frame to *produce one or more of many imagined and as yet unimagined outcomes*. ... . The proof of research by whatever means lies in the pudding of its outcomes. (p. 23, *emphasis added*)

In order for the reader to assess the generative promise of the research, it is apparent that the limitations and delimitations of the research need to be taken into account. Thus, the reader will want to take into consideration that:

- The inquiry was situated in one particular classroom and the perspectives were drawn from a group of students whose parents gave permission for them to take part in the study.
- The inquiry does not take an in-depth case study approach, but it does attempt to present students as special and unique cases.
- Because the primary focus of the research was on the students' perceptions of their learning experiences within the classroom, the inquiry presents the school's and the teacher's actions and practice as background information only.
- Because my observations were scheduled during morning classes, any situations that arose on other occasions that affected the students and their views were not available to me.
- The students did not know in advance what topics we would discuss in our conversations.
- My primary interactions and conversations with the students were limited to three semi-informal sessions of approximately 1/2 hour. This was based on my commitment to parents and the school that data collection would not overly interfere with the students' regular classroom learning schedule.
- A great deal of informal data was generated in my interactions with the students in the classroom, hallways, and playground.

Summary

This chapter has detailed how I entered the hermeneutic circle. My foreclosure has provided an overview of my theoretical and philosophical roots related to students and their learning. In doing so, I have traced the major points of tension between what may be considered as traditional notions of learning and the hermeneutic perspective that underlies the inquiry. I have suggested that the way students perceive and understand their lives in classrooms is influenced by the nature of the discourse structures they bring to, and experience within the school. Finally, I have pointed out that, even though they have often been disregarded in the past, children's perspectives on learning may have value in their potential to inform the process of schooling in "unimagined ways."

CHAPTER THREE

DEVELOPING A WORKABLE PERSPECTIVE: THE THEORETICAL AND RESEARCH CONTEXT

The following discussion begins with the acknowledgement that how children perceive their learning in classrooms arises from, and is situated in, a complex of interacting influences (Smith, 1991, 1997; Davis, Sumara & Luce-Kapler, 2000). Some of these influences will be alluded to in the course of the discussion; however, this chapter focuses principally upon an overview of the various theoretical perspectives that have directed thinking about learning and teaching in classrooms. I then juxtapose with these theoretical perspectives an overview of research that has focussed on children's views on learning and discuss some of the implications that these various views have for the inquiry.

Theoretical Perspectives on Learning

Most educators accord learning a taken-for-granted status, and it remains a "transcendental signified" (Cherryholmes, 1988) aspect of education in that most educators assume that they know what it means to learn. Given that what teachers believe about learning strongly affects their methods and practices (Proctor, 1986) and subsequently how they evaluate it (Peterson & Bainbridge, 1999), it is pertinent to clarify what learning entails for both teachers and students in classrooms. In the course of this discussion, it will become apparent that the assumption that we know what we "mean" by learning may be presumptive.

In the main, although teachers rarely question what they mean by *learning*, they may have difficulty explaining what it means to have *learned* something or how they go about it (Bamberger, 1991). Bamberger asked a group of teachers to engage in a session of discovery learning and after they had completed their learning, she asked them to discuss what they had learned and how they had learned it. She discovered that the teachers generally found the task of explaining very difficult and one that resulted in much perturbation among the teachers in the project. Bamberger had predicated her research on questions such as: How do we go about learning to make things? and How do we describe how we go about learning to do things? She concluded

> The difficulties the teachers had in making an accounting of their learning … lie partly in looking for an accounting that matches the conventions, the privileged descriptions, of what such an accounting is supposed to be—one that is consistent with the idealized modes of learning that we are taught to teach. (p. 43)

In other words, the teachers tried to account for, or explain their learning, in terms of their pre-formed notions of how learning should proceed, a way of thinking that Ellen Langer (1997, p. 92) depicts as "premature cognitive commitment". When their explanations failed to match with their actual experiences, the teachers were somewhat confounded. Perhaps their difficulty in explaining how they learned illustrates that the actual framing of what it means to learn lies embedded in the theoretical orientation of the definer (Lachman, 1997) or the way the definition is applied to a particular domain. In "novel" situations, these definitions may be inadequate or non-productive as the teachers in Bamberger's study found. In addition, depictions of learning undergo change over time. As evidence of this we only need to witness the evolution of notions of what it means to think critically (Johnson, 1992), or what it means to learn or to have learned to read (Phillips, 1994). The latter discussion, still ongoing and apparently unresolved, in turn has generated a continuing debate that centres on how best to help children learn to read (Adams, 1990; Chall, 1967; Holdaway, 1979). This particular "debate" is illustrative of how definitions of learning directly affect both teachers and learners in classrooms.

At the heart of this "how children learn to read" discussion lies the question of whether or not knowledge is constructed or transmitted (Brooks & Brooks, 1994). Constructivists see learners as active meaning makers who are constantly negotiating and refining the information that is presented to fit with the knowledge they already have (Lauritzen & Jaeger, 1997). Thus, "Constructivism, a learning theory, informed by cognitive psychology, educational research, and neurological science, views learning as the product of experience and social discourse" (Adams & Burns, 1999, p. 6). Adams and Burns (1999) provide a framework that synthesizes the major aspects of constructivist theory (and embeds some implications for classroom practice and student learning).

> - Learners bring unique prior knowledge, experience and beliefs to a learning situation.
> - Learning is internally controlled and mediated.
> - Knowledge is constructed in multiple ways, through a variety of tools, resources, experiences and contexts.
> - Learning is a process of accommodation, assimilation, or rejection to construct new conceptual structures, meaningful representations, or new mental models.
> - Learning is both an active and reflective process. Learners combine experience (action) and thought (reflection) to build meaning.
> - Social interaction introduces multiple perspectives through reflection, collaboration, negotiation, and shared meaning (pp. 7 - 8).

Brooks and Brooks in putting forward their *Case for Constructivist Classrooms* (1993) contrast the preceding description with what they picture as classrooms that are dominated by teacher talk, where "teachers disseminate knowledge and generally expect students to identify and replicate the fields of knowledge disseminated" (1993, p.6). In general, those who hold a transmission perspective see learners as relatively passive, absorbing, storing, and reproducing on demand the understandings of their teachers (Caine & Caine, 1994, 1997). The major focus in transmission models is on the teacher as an organizer and manager of learning sequences (Phelan, 1994) and provider of instruction that is hierarchical and sub-skill in nature (Binkley et al., 1995). In contrast, in a constructivist classroom, the teacher is viewed as a coach or facilitator whose major task is to provide resources, demonstrate learning possibilities, and, by observing students as they learn, create situations wherein students can engage in authentic and meaningful tasks (Bainbridge & Malicky, 2000; Brooks & Brooks, 1993). In classrooms where the construction of meaning is seen as essentially a social activity, language development is viewed as interactive and social, and teachers actively encourage group discussions with the aim of promoting negotiated meanings built upon consensus.

The ways teachers and students think about what is important as and to learning become even more complexly configured when a third perspective on learning is introduced. When student learning is viewed from a critical perspective it is located within a socio-political context that inquires into the ways that socially constructed meanings reflect issues of power and control, of subversion and inequity. Such an inquiry folds back upon the individual and social meanings that are constructed and interrogates them in terms of the ways in which they embed and perpetuate inequities and injustices in society (Edelsky, 1994). Whereas transmission notions of learning focus on the content to be delivered and remembered, and constructivism focuses on the ways that individuals make sense of the texts with which they engage and interact, critical social constructivism seeks new ways of centering learning. Edelsky (1994) points up this contrast when she suggests,

> We might find some term that helps us to think about the 'center' of the curriculum as being more complexly derived than a choice between child-centered or teacher-centered and as being more *necessarily* connected to our democratic goals for ending systems of dominance than process-centered or inquiry-centered. (p. 256, *original emphasis)*

What Edelsky suggests is that the goals of education, both explicit and implicit, must be also taken into account when various perspectives on learning are being considered. Thus, not only how students learn in school but also how their learning contributes to their prospects for full participation in the world outside of the school needs to be taken into account. In fact, what and how children learn in schools cannot be isolated from the aims and intentions of the cultural and political forces that flow through the whole business of schooling itself.

Figure 1 presents, in very broad terms, an overview of the major contrasts between transmission, constructivist, and social constructivist notions of learning and teaching. It is important to note that many of these descriptors are not confined to any particular orientation and that in some cases they do overlap.

Figure 1. Three orientations to teaching and learning.

	Transmission	Constructivism	Social Constructivism
Definition of learning	Recall and reproduction of pre-determined meaning	Discovery of personally relevant meanings	Negotiation of socially constructed meanings
Indicators of learning	Impersonal, factual knowledge recalled and reproduced	Personal response resulting from engagement with relevant texts	Consensus arises from interactions within socially relevant contexts
Instructional focus	Individual task completion relative to specified standards or outcomes. Behavioral outcomes	Engagement with text and application of knowledge in novel situations Cognitive outcomes	Problem solving in authentic "real-life" situations. Consideration of alternate viewpoints Cognitive and pragmatic outcomes
Assessment of learning	Standardized, norm-referenced tests.	Portfolios of "work" and learning "demonstrations"	Group "products" and evidence of participation
Role of the learner	Essentially passive External "incentives"	Active Internally motivated	Active Internally and socially motivated
Role of the teacher	Managing and controlling learning sequences	Scaffolding and supporting individual learning	Creating learning contexts and situations that promote interaction and consensus building
Materials	Basal readers and prescribed texts Workbooks and worksheets	Literature and "authentic" texts Personal experiences	Group projects Primary texts (speakers, community outreach)
Methodology	Whole class instruction Teacher talk dominates	Individual and small group instruction and responsive "mini-lessons"	Guided group instruction with individual accountability
Underlying assumptions	An external objective reality exist and can be identified	Reality is subjective and exists only in relation to the individual	Reality is socially constructed and is relative to situation and context

Adapted from Bainbridge and Malicky (2000) and Spiegel (1998)

According to David Pearson (1996) there has been a "remarkable acceptance of the whole language philosophy" that posits language learning as a natural process (Goodman & Goodman, 1979; Harste et al., 1984). This claim may imply that there has been a general acceptance of constructivism as the dominant learning theory in classrooms. However, Brooks and Brooks claim that the "traditional" transmission conception of learning still prevails despite the apparent "demise" of the empiricist framework upon which it is built (Smith, 1993), and the suggestion that alternate paradigms are much more applicable to all aspects of schooling (Eisner, 1985). Echoing this sentiment, Scott and Usher (1999) conclude

> ... it would be a serious mistake to therefore think of positivism as a philosophical curiosity, fit only for the dustbin of history. It could be argued, on the contrary, that this is far from being the case, since it remains a dominant philosophy in practice, and of course is particularly alive and well in the practices of technical-rationality, itself still influential in educational research, practice and policy making. (p. 13)

What is perhaps pertinent to the inquiry I conducted is that most of the conclusions related to the efficacy of particular models have been based upon the perceived effects that various teaching applications have had upon student learning. Whether students share these perspectives has generally not been taken into account. It is apparent that such information may add an important dimension to the discussion of what constitutes effective classroom practice.

Children's Perceptions of Learning

> The teacher said the reason I talked quietly was because I wasn't sure of my answers. This made me very mad because I knew my answers were correct. I just didn't like speaking loudly. It was as if the teacher was looking for an excuse to explain my behavior. I never did learn to speak loudly and it is a problem that people say I have now. Why can't I be just a soft-spoken person? (Waksler, 1996, p. 148)

Although the "practical concern" for my inquiry was directed specifically toward children's perspectives on learning, research which has included children as primary participants has been directed toward a wide range of children's experiences with an understanding of schooling. A sampling of this research reveals that researchers have inquired into:

- the ways that children understand their learning experiences in physical education classes (Sanders, 1996);
- how students view their writing processes (Emig, 1971);
- how students' thinking supports and interferes with their writing (Cleary, 1991);
- the manner in which children are socialized to school (Klein, Kantor & Fernie, 1988); and
- how children view their reading and writing experiences in school (Hudson-Ross, Cleary & Casey, 1993).

In these particular studies, the researcher(s) used interviews as the primary means of gathering the students' views. In addition, teacher/researchers have listened closely to what children say and do during their learning day, recorded their observations and reflected upon them (Paley, 1996), engaged students in extended conversation via dialogue journals and interpreted what the children revealed (McIntyre, 1998), had children draw pictures to represent their view of reading and writing and have discussed their drawings with them (McKay & Kendrick, 2000), and observed children for extended periods as they engage in learning activities (Armstrong, 1981).

In the foregoing studies, one of the principal focuses was on the way students make sense of their experiences in school. One broad finding of these inquiries has been that for some children, school fits comfortably within and enhances their ongoing experience and understanding of the world (Bempechat, 1998; Delpit, 1992). For other children schooling presents a series of new and complex experiences that often leave them confused (Cazden, 1988; Delpit, 1993, 1992; Klein et al., 1988), disempowered, disenfranchised, and alienated (Fine, 1987; Giroux, 1983). For this latter group of children school does not appear to work in their interests, and although the traditional tendency has been to attribute this "failure" to some form of disability within the child, much of the research cited above indicates that many of the problems that these children encounter are unintended or unpredicted consequences of their experiences with the process of schooling itself. To draw a medical analogy these problems are similar to the iatrogenic conditions which are "induced inadvertently by a physician or surgeon or by a medical treatment or diagnostic procedure" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary. (1999). [On-line] Available at http://www.m-w.com/netdict.htm).

In a significant volume entitled *Children's Voices: Children Talk about Literacy*, Hudson-Ross et al. (1993) present research which was based on a series of interviews with children from Kindergarten to Grade 8. The children were asked to talk about their language learning experiences in school. In their introduction, Hudson-Ross and her colleagues note several recurring themes in the children's talk. For the majority of the children:

- School is often a matter of grades, of giving teachers what they want.

There was a strong suggestion in this research that, despite the teacher's best intentions, some children viewed school as a limiting place to be. For some children in the study, school was seen as a place where approval-seeking counted far more than personal learning goals. Some of the children situated their learning outside themselves and they often felt that someone else was responsible for their learning.

- School is sometimes a place of bewilderment where a sense of purpose is often difficult to find.

Seldom in this particular study did children at all grade levels really understand why they were doing school activities. The purpose for activities was often unclear and inadequately defined, leaving children to rely on extrinsic signals such as teacher approval, to motivate their learning. Hudson-Ross et al. (1993) concluded that this sense of bewilderment might remain with these students throughout school, leaving them with little sense of what success in school really means or how it is achieved.

- Support for learning often comes from unexpected sources.

For many children in the study, understanding how to go about a task was intuitively or directly gauged from watching and listening to their peers. The children indicated that they spent a great deal of their time guessing how a task should be done and seldom did they understand the criteria for successful completion.

- Children are required to "negotiate several worlds at once" (p. xv)

The authors noted that quite often children, coming as they do from a variety of cultural and social settings, "see" schools as only one part of their learning and this study suggested that they may see learning outside of school as "more varied, rich, and current than the lessons learned inside" (p. xv).

- "Children often use metaphor to reveal emerging understandings of difficult learning processes" (p. xv)

Through the use of metaphor the children in the study were able to "share their perceptions and experiences of a world that they sometimes sense, but cannot yet articulate in abstract terms" (p. xv). One example of how children use metaphor was furnished by Regina, a Grade 4 student in the study, who told her interviewer

> I think writing is like a sport. It's kind of like recess to me. I'm free to say whatever I feel … . When I write everything just happens. My brain thinks up stuff and then it flows down my arm onto my paper.
>
> My teacher thinks writing is like spelling and punctuation and grammar. It's

> probably boring to her. She likes to check our stories to make sure there are no mistakes. (p. 101)

There is an implicit sense in Regina's description in particular and the foregoing discussion in general of divergent views of learning occupying the same time and space. One interpretation of the data generated in the Hudson-Ross et al. study was that quite often the teachers of the children were working from a set of assumptions about learning that were dissynchronous with those of their students. This lack of synchronicity might play a more direct and inhibiting role in student learning than has previously been taken into account by educators (Purves, 1991). In a study conducted by Cleary (1991), Grade 11 students were interviewed as to their perceptions of what influenced their written compositions. One of her research questions was "How do emotions interact with the writing process?" (p. 474). Her general finding was that the way students felt about themselves and their learning tasks played a critical role in their abilities to write. Among the factors that interfered she noted, "an overburdened consciousness," an exaggerated focus on the surface features of language rather than the development and expression of ideas; "distressing life situations," a heightened concern for everything except the writing task; and "threats in the actual writing environment," a perception of other students or their teachers as threats, that made them "vulnerable to the critical audience" (p. 494) From the data, Cleary concluded that Grade 11 writers have a set of concerns, often of a personal nature, that directly impinge upon their views of themselves as writers, and hence, their ability to write according to the demands placed on them in school settings. Thus, their view of themselves and the situation played a significant role in their school achievement.

In addition to talking with or interviewing students and gathering data through questionnaires, there is also growing awareness that a great deal of information about student learning can be obtained from sources that are often overlooked (Ellis, 1998; Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984; McKay & Kendrick, 1998). For example, as part of a study conducted by McKay and Kendrick (1998), children were asked to draw pictures that represented their views of reading and writing both in and out of school. The students' drawings revealed an interesting shift in perspective, with Grade 1 children most often focussing on the family as the critical literacy context, whereas Grade 3 children tended to see themselves as the chief agent in their literacy. McKay and Kendrick conclude that "Increases across the grades in the variety of settings in which literacy was depicted and in the appearance of literacy tools and artifacts is further evidence of the evolving nature of literacy" (p. 10). They further conclude that "The images of literacy contained in the drawings also appear to reflect that what children know about literacy includes a sense of themselves and others as participants in literacy transactions" (p. 33), a finding which supports some of the conclusions reached by Hudson-Ross et al. (1993). The implication may be drawn that the way children view learning in classrooms and the personal perspectives and viewpoints from which they approach learning may play a pivotal role in the way in which they access the learning being presented by their teacher in the classroom.

The overview of research I have cited, while focused principally on students' perceptions, implicitly acknowledges the influence that teachers and their instruction have on the way students think and what they learn. Christie (1995) tracked the evolution of student talk in classrooms and related it to the modifications that the teacher made in her instructional discourse over the course of a learning unit. She found that students tended to adapt and modify their discourse structures to bring them more in line with those of the teacher. They began to express themselves in the manner of their teacher. Similarly, Purves (1991) reports the results of an international study that investigated the way in which culturally preferred modes of literacy expression were actualized in student writing. The findings of this study and of others (Fang, 1996) indicated that, in general, student writing did reflect the emphases that their teachers placed on various elements of written composition.

Implications for the Inquiry

According to David Smith, The hermeneutic way … "points to how meaning is always 'webbed', challenging us to speak about our life together in a way that is both ecological and ecumenical ..." (1991, p. 202). The research reviewed above provides some indication of how the meanings for "learning" that are created and held by students are connected or webbed to how they view themselves in relation to their teachers, their peers, and their classroom learning activities. There is also an indication that there may be more to learning than simply making curriculum connections, finding the right learning strategies, or applying the appropriate skills. According to Davis et al. (2000, p. 23) "Learning to teach and transforming one's teaching, then, are not simple matters of deliberately selecting and enacting particular pedagogical strategies. They are, rather, complex matters of embodying different habits of perception, of speaking, of theorizing, and of acting." Essentially, one of the characteristics of an "ecological" classroom may be the sense of common purpose shared by both students and teacher that is built upon a recognition and reconciliation of the various discourses that constitute the classroom. In this inquiry, I attempted to gauge not only the extent to which such connections were made, but also the ways these connections were reflected in the students' perspectives on learning.

Summary

There is little question that teaching and learning in classrooms are subject to and guided by the personal theories and beliefs of teachers (Proctor, 1986), the policies of the school, the district, and the Province (Maynes, 1990), the theories, methodologies and practices inscribed and embedded in teaching materials (Bowers, 1974), the interactions and conflicts embedded in the various discourses present (Heath, 1983; Gee, 1989), and the pervasive metaphors, myths and folk knowledge that underwrite and guide the whole institution (Bowers & Flinders, 1990; Phelan, 1994). When the views and perspectives on learning that students develop and hold are factored in, the complexity of children's learning in classrooms becomes apparent. It is against this background that this inquiry proceeded.

CHAPTER FOUR

DEVELOPING A WORKABLE PERSPECTIVE: GAINING ENTRY INTO THE STUDENTS' WORLDS

> *In what contexts can my questions best be answered?* ... Researchers who see children as active participants in the construction of their own contexts view the question very differently from those who see research settings as places where, insofar as possible, everything should be held constant except the manipulation of key independent variables. (Hatch, 1995, p. 124, *original emphasis*)

Research that is conducted within a hermeneutic perspective, that seeks an interpretation of the "lived experiences" of students (Hutchison & Wilson, 1994) and expects that they will be active participants in the development of the account, presents challenges that may not occur in research that is conducted within more quantitative research paradigms (Hart, 1998; Smith, 1997). As O'Kane (2000) points out "... in seeking to involve participants in the research project participation does not simply imply the mechanical application of 'technique' or method, but is instead part of a process of dialogue, action, analysis and change" (p. 138). Thus, in order to develop a workable perspective, the interpretive researcher needs to consider:

- the contexts and situations which best lend themselves to furnishing the data related to the researcher's practical concern (Hatch, 1995)
- the extent to which the researcher can gain entry into the children's world. Commonly called the "adult-child" problem (Hatch, 1988), this usually entails the degree to which the students/interviewees accept the researcher as an empathetic conversationalist, as well as the ability of the researcher to build the rapport necessary for a frank exchange of ideas (Corsaro, 1997)
- the extent to which the interviews/interactions between the researcher and the children as participants can be situated in as natural a setting as possible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)
- the extent to which children as participants can both recall and reflect

upon their learning (or the extent to which the students are able to "teach" the researcher) (Hatch, 1988; Spradley, 1979).

The following section details how I used a "familiarization" phase to investigate the most efficacious ways to respond to the challenges outlined above.

Exploring Contexts: The Familiarization Phase of the Inquiry

> The pilot ... is used more formatively, assisting an investigator to develop relevant lines of questions—possibly providing some conceptual clarification of the research design as well. (Yin, 1994, p. 74)

Corsaro (cited in Lincoln & Guba, 1985) strongly recommends "the use of 'prior ethnography': becoming a participant observer in a situation for a lengthy period of time before the study is actually undertaken" (p. 251). In the context of the proposed research, this "familiarization phase" was designed to serve four major purposes:

- To re-orient the researcher to the 'reality' of life in classrooms;
- To develop the role or persona that the researcher would assume in the data gathering (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988);
- To provide opportunity for the researcher to explore data gathering possibilities (Lincoln & Guba, 1985); and
- To develop the important questions related to the topic of the inquiry (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

(In the discussion that follows and the subsequent account, the school, teacher and the students are identified by pseudonyms.)

Orientation to the site.

The site for the familiarization phase of the inquiry was a Grade 5/6 classroom located in an "inner city" school situated in a large urban school district in the province of Alberta. There were 16 Grade 6 and seven Grade 5 students in the class, which was taught by a white male, Mr. T., who had three years of teaching experience. There were seven girls and 16 boys and Mr. T. commented that this was quite a large group for this particular school. The class was composed of students from Aboriginal, Asian and European backgrounds, reflecting the cultural and ethnic diversity of the community.

There were 175 students in the school, all of whom fitted comfortably into the school's library for the Friday morning assembly and "accolade" sharing. The library contained a half class set of fully equipped computer learning stations that were frequently accessed by Mr. T. and his class. In the classroom, blackboards lined two of the walls and Mr. T. had an overhead projector that he frequently used to introduce, illustrate, and explain in his lessons. The class timetable was set out in "conventional" subject area blocks, and the fifth graders from this class joined the fifth graders in another classroom for Art and Health.

For approximately 12 weeks from March to June, 1998, I spent three mornings each week observing, helping and interacting with the students. Mr. T. introduced me to the class as a "researcher and a teacher," and he indicated that I would be helping him and them with their learning. During this period, I assumed a number of tasks, most of them on an informal basis. Sometimes I would help student groups define a task and provide encouragement for them. Sometimes I would help individual students, mostly clarifying what was required of them on their in-class assignments. On one occasion, I helped a small group of students to develop a reading "strategy" which we later shared with the whole class. At the teacher's invitation, I also introduced and guided a "Paired Reading" activity for the class. The class, with my guidance, continued to do this activity for 10 minutes each day and the record keeping and feedback component of the activity provided me with an opportunity to respond to each student on an individual basis. I accompanied the class on a number of field trips. We went to a Junior-High orientation and soccer tournament and to a music festival at which they performed as a group in the "beginner recorder" class. Overall, the students appeared to accept me in the class and the teacher felt that it would help them as learners if they could become more aware of their learning and how they went about it.

In addition to my observations and interactions in the classroom, I had opportunities to interact with the students both individually and in groups. In my researcher role, I asked the students if any of them would be interested in meeting with me as a group to talk about learning and how students went about it. Mr. T. encouraged them and pointed out to them that it would be helpful for them to talk about the ways they thought about learning. In a sense, our talk was cast as part of their regular school learning, a form of reflection on their own learning. Six students volunteered to meet with me and we met informally on two occasions. During these meetings, the students actively contributed many of the ideas that eventually formed the loose framework for the individual discussions I had with the students. Although I was not actively engaged in data gathering per se, I was developing insights into how best to proceed with the next phase of the inquiry. As Hatch (1988) points out "… because researcher-informant relationships are so important, the researcher should be willing to sacrifice initial data, if necessary to facilitate the development of harmonious relationships. For children especially, time to become familiar with the researcher is essential" (p. 13). Nevertheless, the students did share some interesting perspectives that we were later able to expand upon in our individual conversations.

My goal during this time was to "attempt to gain entry into the conceptual world … [of the students] …" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 37), and this time proved to be productive. As a researcher who had been absent from the "lived world" of elementary students in classrooms for some time, I was able to see classroom life from several different perspectives, and these often contrasted sharply with the preconceptions I brought with me (Hart, 1998). This contrast is best captured within some of the challenges I faced in deciding the role(s) I was to assume in the actual inquiry.

Defining My Role as a Researcher

A critical aspect of an interpretive inquiry is the role, stance, or persona that the researcher adopts in the research context (Boostrom, 1994; Fine & Sandstrom, 1988). In the familiarization phase, Mr. T., the teacher, introduced me as "a teacher and a researcher who is interested in finding out how students learn in classrooms." At the time, this was true, as I had promised to work with the teacher, helping him to implement some teaching strategies in the classroom. However, my primary purpose was to explore the possibilities for my inquiry. Later I found that my introduction as "teacher and researcher" would sometimes inhibit the way the students responded to me in conversations and interactions that we had (Hatch, 1988).

Deciding on the role to be assumed is one that presents some challenges, particularly if the informants in the research are children (Fine & Sandsrom, 1988). Fine and Sandstrom provide some advice and guidelines as to the stances that a researcher may assume when seeking information from children. They begin with a caveat that in any form of interaction with children, we, as adults, are always constrained by the "adultcentric" nature of our understandings, the assumption that we must know children because we were once like them. Similarly, although we may be physically close, we are usually socially distant. Thus, all interactions are premised on the idea that children move and have their being in discourses that are to a large extent inaccessible, and often a sustained mystery to adults (Paley, 1979, 1996).

Two of the major challenges that Fine and Sandstrom (1988) identify are the extent to which the adult has positive contact with the children and the extent to which the adult has authority over them. They suggest that the most productive role that can be assumed by the qualitative researcher is one that stresses "positive affect and low authority" (p. 14). In my initial inquiry, both the terms, *teacher* and *researcher* presented me in an authority role that made it difficult at times for me to bring down the already extensive barriers that existed because of the child-adult dimension. In addition, I became aware how the establishment of a trusting relationship was complicated by the obvious distance between the children's discourses and my own (Gee, 1989; Pianta & Walsh, 1996).

In addition to establishing with the students the way in which I wanted to be perceived by them, I had to decide on the perspective I would take when observing in the classroom. I was aware that the way I viewed classroom life rested on preconceptions and assumptions formed from experience, and this perspective that shaped my view of how teaching and learning were *supposed* to proceed in the classroom (Boostrom, 1994). Boostrom identifies the following possible perspectives that may be assumed by the qualitative researcher.

The videocamera.

Boostrom suggests that in this role, the observer "acts as a sponge," taking in data without any pre-conceived notions or framework. The attention of the observer moves randomly without seeking anything of depth or meaning. Although significant events may be recorded, they are merged with a "grocery list" of observations. In the initial stages of the familiarization phase, because of the preconceptions I brought to the classroom, I found this role almost impossible to assume. From the outset, I was always looking for ways that I could help the teacher or the students. I did find, however, that I had great difficulty observing anything specific as there were so many things occurring simultaneously in the classroom. In a videocamera role, I had no particular focus as I was guided only by my general sense that I wanted to find out what "learning" entailed for the students.

The playgoer.

According to Boostrom, instead of observing and recording "mere objects", the observer begins to see well-rounded characters, individuals caught up in stories of emotion and conflict. As I spent more time in the class, I found myself coming to know the students and feeling, at times, a little frustrated on their behalf. In retrospect, I sometimes became overly empathetic with them, often having to pull back and return to the context and the reality that the teacher faced in dealing with this particular group of children. It was only when I reminded myself that the teacher knew these students and their situation much more deeply and empathetically than I did, that I was I able to readjust my thinking and to see the students as engaged in the natural unfolding life of the classroom. At this point, I was able to observe them as learners and I began to record some of the apparent influences on their learning.

The evaluator.

In this role the observer, as a teacher who "knows", begins to compare and judge the occurrences in the classroom, inevitably seeing them as productive or not. At times during the familiarization phase, I found myself being quite uncomfortable by the "methods" being used in the classroom, particularly when *I felt that I knew* much more effective ways of achieving the same outcome. It took me some time to come to the realization that the teacher was presenting the learning in a larger context. His instruction was based on his knowledge of his students, not on the somewhat cursory judgements I was making based on the short time that I had spent in the classroom. Once I was able to curtail my evaluative tendencies, I was able to direct my attention toward the students in particular, and to their specific responses to the situations they faced.

The subjective inquirer

In this role, the researcher begins an active inquiry into the "meaning" of what is taking place in the classroom. The inquiry is not only into the activities of the teacher and the students, but is broadened to include the observer and his or her construction of the events that are occurring. As I spent more time in the classroom and began to hone my observation and field note recording skills, I began to realize that the stance I chose to take directly influenced my perceptions, and I began to re-focus on what I thought about when I was observing. I also began to realize that my presence was somewhat puzzling and even, at times, disconcerting for the students and their teacher, and that, when the novelty of my presence wore off, they did not see me as an essential part of their daily routine. Although it made a critical difference to me, they were not overly concerned with the interpretive stance I was assuming.

Gaining Entry into the Students' Worlds

In addition to the challenges faced by interpretive researchers in deciding on the "role" they will assume, Ann Meis Knupfer (1996) identifies two more difficulties or constraints that are faced by researchers when doing qualitative research with children. The first deals with the challenge of "entering" into the children's worlds. She points out why this may be problematic, "Not only do we come with our own cultural biases, but we also bring our adult-centered views of what constitutes childhood" (1996, p. 136). In addition, Hatch (1988) reminds us that all adult-child interactions are asymmetrical, meaning that within such relations the adult is assumed to be in a position of authority and the child's responses are governed accordingly. Hatch further points out that when the researcher is working within a hermeneutic perspective, trying to access the meanings and understandings of the informants, it is important to develop an "optimum researcher-informant relationship". Thus, one of the challenges I faced was to relinquish my preconceptions of what it "means" to be a student, in effect, to attempt to view the world from their perspective. Essentially, this meant adopting a persona that was the "least-adult" as possible (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988).

A least-adult role however, may be puzzling for students, leading them to even doubt the sincerity of the adult. Thus, for most of the students in the familiarization phase of my inquiry, my concern with their views on learning was viewed as rather strange and unusual. Apparently no one had asked them before what they thought about their learning and what helped them to learn in school (Janesick, 1994). In addition, I found that my initial introduction as a "teacher and researcher" created a somewhat stereotypical response from the students when I talked with them, as they could not see me as anything other than a teacher. A partial explanation for this may rest in Hatch's observation that "young children may equate the interview context with patterns of instruction organized around recitation; i.e., the teacher asks questions to which there is only one correct answer and students respond until the correct answer is given" (1988, p. 8). This in fact often proved to be the case. In one instance after an interesting conversation with a student in which she described some of the problems she had with math, she asked, "Did I get the answers right?"

In addition, such responses may have arisen from the fact that my presence as a "researcher" did not define my role nor my intentions clearly enough. For these students, I remained a teacher, and, in addition to being an adult I was also an Anglo-Canadian, middle-class, "older' male. Although I did not explore this in detail, age was an important consideration for them. One of the students remarked to me one day that I was "old." When I didn't reply directly, he informed me with a certain vigour, that I was "really old." When I didn't respond again, he shook his head and turned away in apparent bewilderment. I suspect that the bottom line was that, in their eyes, I had connections to their teacher and was apparently in the class to check out their learning behaviour in the name of something called research. They appeared to govern their responses accordingly. Clearly "research" for them had a particular connotation and my activities with them did not fit it. It became obvious to me that I needed to be much clearer in explaining to them what I was doing with them in the second phase of the inquiry.

responses accordingly. Clearly "research" for them had a particular connotation and my activities with them did not fit it. It became obvious to me that I needed to be much clearer in explaining to them what I was doing with them in the second phase of the inquiry.

One of the least-adult roles suggested by Fine and Sandstrom (1988) is that of "friend", a role that enables the researcher "to interact with children in the most trusted way possible – without having an explicit authority role" (p. 17). This may be so, although there were times when my attempts to assume the "friend role" in the classroom created a certain ambiguity, as this note from my reflective journal illustrates:

> May, 1998
>
> Today the students were working on a math problem. They had to work with their partners on interpreting some statistical data they had been given about tree growth. As one of the students did not have a partner, I sat down with him (uninvited, an "adult" privilege), and declared myself to be his partner for this activity. I had done this on one occasion before with him and things had worked well. Today I listened as he talked about what we were to do and how we were to go about it. As we looked at the data, I asked, "What do you think this tells us?" From this point on I continued to challenge him (in what I thought was a friendly way) to think about how the data we had developed could be applied rather than reproduced. At one point in our discussion he became quite indignant with me as he believed that he was following the teacher's directions appropriately, and, as his partner, I was suggesting he wasn't. Eventually we attracted Mr. T.'s attention, who came over and made the student apologize to me for raising his voice.

As I reflected upon this incident, I was very much aware that I could (or, perhaps, should) have said something at the time, but my problem was rooted in the fact that I had not clearly defined my role in the classroom for both the students and myself. On the one hand, I had assumed a role somewhere between teacher and friend with this student, on the other, I had overlooked that fact that Mr. T. had spent a great deal of time developing the boundaries for acceptable adult-student interactions in the class. One of the rules seemed to be: "No matter what an adult says to you, you are not allowed to raise your voice." This student had apparently failed to follow this and, even though I did not totally agree with it, I was bound by this understanding.

A second related challenge for the qualitative researcher that Knupfer (1996) posits relates to the extent to which the researcher can participate in the children's world once "entry" has been gained. More specifically, she points out, "In some cultures, particular forms of social interaction and literacy events between children and adults may not be appropriate, thus, we may violate a culture-specific adult role" (1996, p. 136). By being cognizant of this, the researcher can bring a certain sensitivity to the situation and be aware of situations where bridges have to be constructed (Seidman, 1998). Thus, in addition to trying to "learn everything there is to know about the setting, the culture, and the study topic" (Morse, 1994), an additional purpose of the familiarization phase was to develop a sense of the possible in terms of what students would share with me and how the obvious gaps between their worlds and mine could be bridged. I was seeking to develop a relationship with the students that was both "trusting and interconnected" (Manning, 1997), while looking into the most effective ways and means of gathering data within this trust. An additional challenge relates to how a researcher refers to the children-as-participants in the inquiry, both in face-to-face interactions and in setting out the interpretive account. Thorne (1994) points out that children seldom refer to themselves as "children", regarding it as a form of put-down. Similarly, "kids … sounds diminishing, with the semantic whiff of goats" (p. 9). "Students", to my thinking placed an emphasis on me as a teacher, which is what I wanted to avoid if possible. Like Thorne, I found that, given the somewhat limited choices, they generally preferred "kids", and used the term when they were talking with me about themselves; so, I usually adopted this convention. In Thorne's view "The term also evokes generational solidarity, a kind of bonding in opposition to adults" (p. 9). In writing up the account, however, I found that I subconsciously chose to use "students" when I was discussing their activities as beings-within-the-classroom, "children" or "peers" when I was discussing them as a research focus, and "kids" when I wanted to stress them as persons in their own right.

During the familiarization phase, I did have occasion to talk with individual students and to assess the feasibility of using a semi-structured "interview" format as a means of gathering data. I discovered that any conversations I had with the students that were structured around direct "questions" were not overly productive in terms of having them develop and share their personal perspectives. Siegert (1986) suggests that this is to be expected as

> Data from interviews, which are conducted by an adult interviewer, give us more insight into competencies displayed by children in interactions with adults, where they must cope with the adult's definition of the situation. (p. 373)

Given Siegert's caveat, Weber (1986) suggests that in order for interviews to be effective in a qualitative research setting, they must "in a sense (extend) an invitation to conversation" (p. 65). She points out that "In our society, interviewing is often associated with intrusive journalism, job-hunting, or with the manipulative paradigm of experimental psychology" (p. 67). For children in an "inner city" school, one may suspect that interviews with adults are most likely to be associated with a procedure that occurs in the Principal's office, usually, although not always, with unpleasant consequences for the student. Thus, I concluded that the challenge I faced in establishing rapport with the students rested on my ability to recast this interview process as conversations. It appeared that this could constitute the first step in establishing a relationship that is both "trusting and interconnected" (Manning, 1997). As the interview process is central to gathering qualitative data (Hutchison & Wilson, 1994; Seidman, 1998; Weber, 1986), it is apparent that the way the students perceive "interviews" is critical to the extent and depth of the information that they will be willing to share.

Overall, I assumed that we needed to engage in discussions that were more dialogic and conversational, what Sumara and Davis (1997) call "complicit research." To this end, Ellis (1998) suggests that often indirect approaches can yield the information that the researcher is seeking. She suggests that "creative assignments … (may) … produce important and useful insights into students" (Ellis, 1998, p. 58). Ellen Langer (1997) suggests that "sideways in" techniques often serve to inform interpretive inquiry much more effectively than direct data gathering techniques.

Moving in sideways.

After my initial introduction to the class, I began to interact with students both individually and in small groups. I realized that one way of moving in sideways was by having open group discussions during which I guided a somewhat freewheeling exchange of ideas and opinions. The following discussion we had about competition illustrates how such discussions can establish the foundation for later individual conversations.

JP: Some people feel it's important to be competitive?
Jonathon: Pride! It's important to see who's better and I don't want to be made fun of!
Keith: There's a push to do better, be over-competitive … Have to win … not a good idea!
Lina: Very important to be good at something, like in math …
[A great deal of confused talk and comments from students]
JP: Do you think that's learning?
Several: Both!
JP: Nadia, what do you think?
Nadia: I don't know cause I'm behind in class and people make fun of me for being slow and I just want to be ready for next activity and try to catch up.
JP: Who is competitive in this class?
Several [Shout out various names] Me! J. and K!
We just look at each other's marks to see how we're doing.
Yes, to see what I got wrong to see what I missed studying.
JP: To see answers or learn it from someone else, or?
Jonathon: What my mark is and how I can improve.
JP: Is that competitive with self or others?

Lina: I don't know. Sometime I want to beat sometime I don't so I can't. And no good, kids and I'm in the middle and I want to be away from them and I hate it like they get a 5 or 4 and I really want to beat K. or JR and I be happier if I beat them!
JP: So you'd like to be in the other group sometimes?
Lina: Yah, like I'm only one in the middle and I want to
JP: We will have individual talks too.
Keith: I'm competitive with myself.
JP: Lina's talking about another angle.
Jonathon: Can I get one thing straight! My name is Rattrap or Wayne or whatever! [Laughs]
JP: Is this class as competitive as last year?
Jonathon: No, like last year they always said it's your fault or you're cheating or you missed.
JP: Why is this class different?
Keith: Last year the Grade 6 influenced; we didn't have any influence!
Nadia: They are older and have to win and we are younger and we have to lose.
Jonathon: It's easier cause we're all in Grade 6
Several: Yeah, last year we were kind of outcasts.

As a result of such discussions, I became aware that learning for these students was perceived as an interrelated complex of personal concerns that was situated within the immediate classroom context. Overall, it was from these interactions, I was able to develop a *general* sense of how the students thought about learning and how I might go about talking with them individually in the most productive manner.

Despite the fact that the group discussions tended to be dominated by the vocal few, there were indications that small group discussions allowed students to express their personal opinions and to draw upon and expand upon each other's opinions. For example, the majority of the students in this round of group discussions appeared to equate learning with production or external indicators and the subjects they were "good at" and, conversely, subjects that were their "least favorite". In my individual conversations in the second phase, I pursued these themes as entry questions or conversation starters. One student described how he went about learning, suggesting to me that when I talked about learning with other students I should consider what students did when they were learning. He suggested that I inquire into their ability to visualize, to find out if they were able to form pictures in their heads as a strategy for remembering. This kind of suggestion and others that the students made during the informal group discussions did help me by providing a bridge to the conversations I had with them as individuals. In addition, the students who took part in the group discussions appeared more comfortable talking with me individually than those who had not met with me previously in a group.

Developing Focussing Questions

> The qualitative researcher plans to use part of the study to learn what the important questions are. (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 32)

Following the advice of Bogdan and Biklen (1992), I devoted part of the first phase of the inquiry to investigating not only the ways and means by which I could collect data, but also potentially important questions related to my practical concern. Thus, when my rather vague notion of "wanting to inquire into students' perspectives on learning" was situated in the classroom, some interesting questions began to emerge. They included:

- How do students see their lives in classrooms unfolding?
- How do these students perceive school learning and what impact do they see learning having on their lives?
- What influences do the students perceive in their learning—what helps, what hinders?
- From a student's perspective, what do teachers do that helps them to learn?
- What purposes do these students see in what they do in classrooms?
- What value do they place on their classroom learning activities?
- How do they see themselves in relation to the overall idea of "school"?

- How do students perceive what it means to have "learned" something?
- What differences, if any, do they see between learning in different subject areas?
- How important is it for students to be recognized and acknowledged as individual and unique learners?
- How does the depiction of learning as "work" affect students' perceptions?
- Do the students see learning from a perspective other than "work"?

There were, of course, additional questions that emerged as I observed in the classroom and talked with the students, and it became apparent to me that as the inquiry proceeded, there were to be many more questions that would emerge. It was also apparent that the questions that I had pre-formulated remained relatively abstract and I found that they needed to be refined and restated if the students were to be able to respond to them. However, as I began to focus on individual students and their activities within the daily classroom routine, it was obvious that they were better able to talk about their learning when the discussion was referenced to their immediate classroom experiences. For example, saying to a student, "I noticed in math that you were having a little problem following Mr. T's directions; how do you usually deal with this?" rather than the more general, "What are some of the things that help you (or make it difficult for you) to learn in math?" tended to elicit a more extensive personal response.

Overall, the general questions I posed above proved to be useful guides as they presented a number of thematic frameworks within which I gathered the students' experiences with learning (Kvale, 1996). In a general sense the themes that were embedded in the questions dealt with identities, theories, values, activities, relationships, metaphors, and emotions, as well as contradictions, paradoxes and anomalies, reflecting the idea that all learning in classrooms is ecologically webbed

(Smith, 1991) and that meaning is always "constituted by the participants" (Bowers & Flinders, 1990, p. 11). When a classroom is viewed from a hermeneutic perspective, questions arise continuously. However, the general questions I generated provided effective starting points around which the interviews with the students proceeded.

Exploring Children's Response-abilities

One reason for the sparseness of research that has children as participants may lie in the commonly held belief that "... children's capacities to understand and communicate may limit their abilities to reveal insider perspectives" (Hatch, 1988, p. 3). In essence, what Hatch indicates is that children may not be the most reliable sources of data about learning. Another reason may be that data that emerges from adult-child interactions are so affected by the child's perceptions of what is expected, that it really does not represent what the child is thinking.

By way of response to the foregoing caveats, there are indications that children are more than capable of reflective talk, and that it is often in indirect ways that they indicate their level of awareness of various constructs and abstractions related to their personal ways of knowing (Donaldson, 1978; Graue & Walsh, 1999). The indication that children are indeed capable of serious and deep thought reflects in many ways the changing view of children and of childhood generally. Claire O'Kane (2000) points out

> The emergence of the paradigm ... [that seeks to explore and validate childhood experiences] ... reflects a move away from seeing children as passive recipients of adult socialization, to a recognition that children are social actors in their own right, are active participants in the construction and determination of their experiences, other people's lives, and the societies in which they live. (p.136)

A review of the research in this area indicates that children at almost any age, can indeed engage in reflective thought about their own capabilities. Susan Hayter

(1990) summarized research that investigated children's self-concept and one of her conclusions was that "Young children [ages four to seven] are able to self-report measures to make judgements about their competency or adequacy if these are couched in terms of concrete, observable behaviors." And, under certain conditions, "… young children are able to make such judgements about their cognitive competence, physical competence, and behavioral conduct" (1990, p. 87). McKay and Kendrick (2000) in looking at how children in Grade 1, 2, and 3 represented their perspectives on reading and writing by way of their drawings, concluded "The images of literacy contained in the drawings also appear to reflect that what children know about literacy includes a sense of themselves and others as participants in particular literacy transactions" (p. 33). The research study conducted by Hudson-Ross, Cleary and Casey (1993) which invited students from Grade 1 to Grade 8 to talk about how they engaged in reading and writing indicated that students at all ages are capable of engaging in reflection and self-appraisal. Children in the study demonstrated their ability to discuss their literacy learning and development. For example, Hudson-Ross et al. reproduce a conversation during which three Grade 1 students were asked questions such as: "How did you know how to spell like that?" and "… tell me how you have changed as writer." To prompts such as this, the children gave extended descriptions of how they approached the tasks and the procedures they used when going about them. Similarly, in their interview research with Grade 3, 4, and 5 students in Australia, van Kraayenoord and Paris found that "The quality of students' comments suggests that students are able to assess their own work and provide both cognitive and affective evaluations according to particular features that influence learning" (1997, p. 532). Leroy, in her doctoral research interviewed Grade 5 girls in an inner-city school and concluded "… all of the girls in this study were exceptionally frank and open about discussing their lives outside the classroom as well as their experiences within it" (1999, p. 53). Harste, Woodward, and Burke in the introduction to their book *Language Stories and Literacy Lessons* (1984) state "… the result of our efforts have taught us … that children know much more than we or past researchers have ever dared to assume, and that many of the premises and assumptions with which we began must give way to more generous perspective if research and understanding are to proceed" (p. xviii). Thus, there appears to be ample evidence to suggest that children can engage in discussions that call upon them to actively reflect upon and appraise their own learning.

Summary

In this chapter, I have discussed some of the challenges faced by interpretive researchers who conduct inquiries with children as participants. Among these challenges are the need for the researcher to define the most productive context within which to locate the inquiry, the need to overcome (or take into account) the distance between the researcher's and the children's worlds, and the need to consider the children's abilities to articulate their perspectives. In addition, in another aspect of my foreclosure, I have suggested that my observations in the classroom were subject to the interpretive horizon that I brought to it. I traced these influences as they appeared in the familiarization stage of the inquiry, a phase that was specifically designed to re-orient me to life in an elementary classroom, to give me an opportunity to look into data gathering possibilities and to the development of particular questions related to my concern.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONDUCTING THE INQUIRY

> The act of research is conceived as *nested contexts* including the researcher's perspectives on research, theory, and ... children; the role negotiated with/by the participants; and the relationships that ensue over time. From these contexts, data are generated in a local way that represents their complex and dialectical relationships. Data are not 'out there' to be collected by objective researchers. Instead they come out of the researcher's interactions in a local setting with participants, and out of interpretations of what is important to the questions of interest.
>
> (Graue & Walsh, 1998, p. 73, *emphasis added*)

When Graue and Walsh write about *nested contexts* they are referring to the fact that, in the generation and interpretation of the data, interpretive research does not consist of clearly separated or distinct stages. They capture the idea that every aspect of data generation, observation, field "jottings" and notes, conversations, memos and reflective journaling, debriefing with colleagues, and ongoing literature review, are contiguous and continuous. Each aspect informs the other in a constant "looping back", which is depicted as the return arc of the hermeneutic circle (Ellis, 1998). In fact, Ellis points out that "The uncovering of an entity is the return arc of the hermeneutic circle and it is the response to our inquiry" (p. 23). In essence, this means that data as they are uncovered are reexamined and reinterpreted continuously. In John Smith's terms, "Good interpretation can only be pursued with a constant movement back and forth between the expression and the web of meanings within which that expression is lodged" (1993, p. 16).

Thus, hermeneutic inquiry is a process of constantly "looping back" to revisit data in light of what has been "uncovered" in the course of the inquiry (Ellis, 1998). Essentially, ~~this~~ means acknowledging that there are aspects of the topic that will only come to light as the inquiry proceeds. The researcher anticipates uncoverings, but cannot predict what they will be or their nature! Often there are multi-loopings involved as the researcher not only generates data, but is immersed in it, allowing additional questions to emerge through reflection and ongoing reading of related studies (Graue & Walsh, 1998).

For example, during phase two of the inquiry, I became intrigued by the students' responses to various aspects of "competition" and the apparent personal non-competitiveness that they evidenced in the classroom and in their play. In turn, this led me to consider the literature on "opposition and resistance" (Anyon, 1980; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1983; Leroy, 1995) as I attempted to interpret and generally understand what was occurring and why it might be so. I was engaging in the "backward arc of the hermeneutic circle," as I evaluated my initial interpretations and attempted to explain for myself the behaviours that I was observing and what I was hearing in the student voices. These concerns appeared at the time to be only tangentially related to my initial question, but later I realized that they were integral to a more complete understanding of what influenced students' perspectives on learning. I became more aware that what I observed and attended to, what I recorded and what I disregarded were critically important research decisions. Thus, my "ability" to assume alternative conceptual frameworks and to ask old questions in new ways was a key component of the unfolding spiral of interpretive research. As Julia Ellis (1998) summarizes:

> To understand a part, one must understand the whole, and to understand the whole, one must understand the individual parts. One can visualize this back and forth movement between the part and the whole, a movement that has no natural starting or end point, as the hermeneutic circle at work in all human understanding. (p. 16)

Thus, in the description of the setting and the data generation methods that follow, though they may appear distinct, it is essential to keep in mind at all times the concept of the researcher's movement within the hermeneutic circle.

The Research Setting

> Any inquiry process should begin with a purpose and with locating a setting in which the purpose is available to be observed or accomplished.
>
> (Green & Chandler, 1990, p. 204)

Phase two of the inquiry was situated in the same classroom where I conducted the familiarization phase, except that in this phase the class had seventeen Grade 6 students only. Its cultural composition reflected the class in which I conducted my familiarization inquiry, except that this time we had Yin, a newly arrived student from Viet Nam, who spoke no English. I generated data in the classroom over a period of approximately five months, from February to June, 1999. I had indicated to the teacher, Mr. T., that I would be modifying my "role" vis-à-vis the students in the second phase, and that I would not be teaching or supervising. I observed in the classroom every morning on a daily basis. Once the students were comfortable with my presence, I began small group discussions with all of those students whose parents/guardians had given their consent. Following this, I interviewed each of these students using a modified version of the initial interview/conversation protocol suggested by Seidman (1998) (a procedure that will be described in detail later in this chapter). I secured permission from the students' parents/guardians to tape-record and transcribe the protocols from both my small group and individual conversations with the students. (The request and permission form is included in Appendix A.)

The school.

My major focus during the inquiry was on discerning and interpreting the students' perceptions of learning within this particular classroom; however, it was obvious that there were many aspects of personal, social, and cultural growth that were stressed in the school, and that these elements needed to be accounted for as they provided the broader context for the interpretive account (Graue & Walsh, 1998).

The students were located within an interactive school community that contributed to their personal and social growth. As the senior students in the school, this group of Grade 6 students, like their predecessors, was afforded numerous opportunities to engage in leadership activities. They were expected to lead by example and the principal and teachers made every effort to include them in the organization and governance of school activities. They were represented on various school committees and clubs. They also took active roles in other initiatives such as supervising and guiding other students and parents during school presentations, setting up displays and generally acting as behind the scene organizers for school events. They acted as team leaders for the school "sports day" (activities that emphasized involvement over competitiveness). Their major role during this time was to ensure that every member of their "team" from kindergarten to Grade 6 had opportunity to actively participate. They were also responsible for monitoring their groups and ensuring they "stayed together," no easy feat given the wide variation in age and attention spans!

I accompanied the students on several field trips. During these trips, they acted very responsibly and seldom did their teacher have cause to overtly discipline them. In fact, they appeared to enjoy these trips and maintained an easy good humor throughout, both going and coming and while they were there. On one particular trip for an orientation to a Junior High school, they revealed an easy camaraderie and a cohesive group spirit. This was particularly evident in the "friendly" soccer tournament arranged by the Junior High teachers. They accepted the nomination of one of them as the most "valuable player" with genuine warmth and acceptance and, even though I was supposed to be in a supervisory role, actively included me in the group and the celebration afterwards.

A great deal of their socially acceptable behaviour within the school could be attributed to the clear and uncompromising guidelines established by the principal and followed through by all of the staff. I had the sense that each staff member took responsibility for every student regardless of the class to which that student belonged. These clear behavioural norms were evident in Mr. T.'s class. He had set viable expectations for the students' behaviour in class and they adhered to them during the time I was observing. There were also clear guidelines for how they were expected to interact with each other, which, in the main, tended to be followed. On occasion when they were not, the principal and/or their teacher would frankly discuss the situation with the class in general and with a particular student if the need arose. It appeared that nothing was left to chance in the school and all breaches of the school rules and behavioural standards were dealt with directly and resolutely. In general, such procedures were expected and accepted by the students and, as a result, major disruptions in school and classroom routines were minimized.

The Friday morning whole school assemblies also contributed to the building of a cohesive school culture. During these weekly assemblies, the principal and teachers took the opportunity to formally acknowledge individual student's special contributions to the school, to each other, and to themselves. These acknowledgements took the form of "accolades," and although the accolades were most often from teachers to students, students could also nominate teachers or each other for recognition and appreciation. The assemblies also featured an open forum for examining, sharing, and discussing aspects of the school culture that needed to be emphasized or reinforced. Generally, these open discussions were devoted to stressing the need for students to be sensitive to the physical and emotional needs of each other, but opportunity was also provided for them to bring up items of personal concern or interest, which they often did. The principal encouraged this open discussion and often referred concerns back to the students for their advice as to how particular school problems or personal dilemmas could be resolved.

Overall, the school-as-community placed particular emphasis on the development of citizenship skills, both within and without the school. Students were provided with numerous opportunities to become socially responsible members of the school, a community that embraced the ideals of ethical and moral behaviour and democratic problem-solving. In general, most of the Grade 6 students responded positively to these expectations and the result was a group of students who were, for the most part, very reliable and trustworthy. Overall, the staff took active steps to develop and maintain a community built around an ethic of care (Noddings, 1995). The principal and the teachers appeared to know each child in the school on a personal basis and the school was a warm and inviting place to be.

The students had many opportunities to experience culturally enriching activities in addition to those within the "prescribed" curriculum. For example, the Grade 6 students took part in a DARE program designed to help them understand and deal with the dangers of substance abuse. Their self-reports indicated that, during this program, they enjoyed the discussions and activities. Jonathon (one of the students in the study) was particularly pleased and he told me, "I graduated top student in the DARE class and … [there were] only two medals, one for best essay and one for best student, and I won best student." The students attended a three-day end-of-the-year camp, took swimming lessons, attended a music festival, were part of a whole school production of a Shakespeare play, and had opportunities to hear presentations by guest presenters and authors throughout the year.

For many of the students in the class the emphasis on the development of their social skills and responsibilities proved to be the highlights of their school year. When I asked, "Looking back, what are the highlights of this year?" Most of the students acknowledged as least one of the activities mentioned above (the DARE sessions, field trips, the patrol picnic etc.). Although, in my conversations with them, they did not specifically mention academic activities as being highlights of their year, their end-of-the-year "survey" responses to their teacher did reveal that they felt they had grown in such areas as self-confidence, and they included "developing art skills and getting better in math." Overall, for the students, particularly those that were called upon to take an active leadership role in the school, their "social" growth did impact upon their academic learning in that their personal sense of efficacy and self-confidence did spill over into their classroom learning activities.

It was also noteworthy that during the whole time I observed in the classroom, particularly during the second year, I observed no instance of overt or blatant misbehavior from any of the students. I sensed that my presence in the classroom had very little to do with this. Clearly, Mr. T. and the students had defined the interactive and behavioural boundaries, and they generally operated within them. This does not mean that the students, as a group or individually, did not misbehave, as sometimes it was obvious that the class was being reprimanded for something they had done when I was not present. Overall, I always felt that Mr. T. was in control, and that the students respected his authority and felt he had their best interests at heart.

Support for learning in the school.

It was obvious that the school devoted considerable effort to furnishing the resources necessary for supporting the students' learning. The teachers had available current curriculum resources and texts as well as supplementary and support materials, such as Math manipulatives and Science lab materials. There was a wide range of literature available in the classroom for the students to read, and the library was well stocked with traditional and current reading materials. In addition, books were prominently displayed throughout the school and it was evident that the principal and staff made extensive efforts to raise and support the literacy consciousness of the students and the community at large.

For the Grade 6 students additional classroom support was often available. The teacher drew upon the expertise of the school administrators in Language Arts and the

Central office consulting staff in Mathematics to supplement and extend the students' opportunities to learn. Yin, our ESL student, had a full time aide, who often was able to provide help and support for the other students when her student was working in a group setting. Within the context of this particular classroom the teacher made sincere efforts to expose the students to multiple and varied learning experiences. The students made considerable use of the technology available in the school, usually spending at least one period each day in the library with the computers. Their "computer time' was usually structured and related to some aspect of the prescribed curriculum. Manipulatives were used extensively in mathematics, and in science classes, the students were encouraged to engage in experimentation, observation, and hands-on learning activities. The prescribed textbooks provided the core of the instructional program, but the teacher often supplemented these texts with additional resources. When using the prescribed texts, the teacher tended to follow the teacher resources and manuals, and generally to implement the program in the prescribed manner.

It was apparent that a great deal of the school's resources was devoted to maximizing the students' achievement, but it was also apparent that for some of the students this achievement was not forthcoming to the degree expected. In a very real sense this school was faced with the perennial problem of all schools: despite the best efforts of caring teachers and administrators, some children do not achieve the anticipated levels of learning success, however defined (Maynes, 1991).

Data Generation

A variety of interrelated and interconnected data were generated during the inquiry principally from my classroom observations, field notes, small group discussions, conversations/interviews with individual students, personal reflection, and discussion with my supervisor and colleagues.

Classroom observations.

Mr. T. introduced me to the class by saying, "Mr. Proctor is interested in what Grade 6 students think about learning in school and he will be spending time with us for the rest of the year. He would like to talk with some of you later, and he will explain how this will happen once he has been here for a while." He also pointed out that I was not a teacher and for some of the students from the previous year, this was a little problematic, but they generally accepted my new role. Sometimes though, we broke the rule. One day Keith, one of the students who I will introduce in the next chapter, said to me, "Mr. Proctor, I know I am not allowed to ask you this, but if you were trying to figure out the differences between Greek education and ours, what would you say?" It was an invitation I simply could not refuse.

In the main, however, for the first month of the inquiry I observed and interacted quite informally with the students. My observations were mostly confined to the classroom; however, I spent time with them during music, in the library and the gym and during their recess breaks. Once the students returned permission forms, I began to concentrate my classroom observations on these students in their daily activities.

Field "jottings" and notes.

Graue and Walsh (1998) point out that it is perhaps misleading to think that a researcher can make extensive "field notes" that record what is occurring in a classroom at any given time. They suggest that the most a researcher can hope for it to record "jottings" that may be retrospectively fleshed out at a less hectic time. I found this to be the case; concentrating on even one student for an extended period revealed a shifting interplay of individual and group activity and inaction, response and simply silence, and any distraction, no matter how minor, meant that the observational thread was often lost. Quite often my jottings contained the words "apparently" or "appears to be" to indicate that I was really not sure of what was occurring with the student or students.

The frequency of such notes indicated to me the general tentativeness of my interpretative inquiry. However, my field notes based on observations helped me build a reasonably comprehensive picture of the setting and the culture of this particular class, as well as of the individual students who were its members (Morse, 1994).

I recorded two types of observational field notes, "descriptive" and "focussed" (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). The descriptive notes provided a general sense of the events that unfolded in the classroom and included such things as the day's timetable of activities, the teacher's actions and instructions to the students, responses by the students to questions or situations that arose in the class, and the lesson "content" and focus of the student and teacher activities. In my more focussed field notes, I recorded the actions and responses of particular students to the instructional activities. I also recorded marginal comments, "personal reactions" and questions arising. Later, when I talked with the students individually I was able to incorporate my notes into our conversations, thus situating our discussions as closely as possible within their lived worlds.

Group discussions.

After a period spent observing and being with the students in a variety of school settings, I split the eight students into two groups for our introductory small group discussions. The small group discussions served a number of purposes:

- They allowed me to introduce myself more personally to the students.
- They provided opportunities for them to feel "involved" in the research project and to develop, in a limited way, a sense of ownership of the project.
- They enabled me to develop ideas that served to provide entry points for my individual discussions with them.
- They also provided transitions to our individual conversations.

The group discussions also allowed me to observe how the students interacted with each other in a more informal setting than in their regular classroom setting. The contrasts were revealing and will be discussed further in Chapter 7.

Interviews/Conversations.

As I indicated in Chapter 4, research "talk" with students represents a number of distinct challenges and as such, it is useful to present an overview of these challenges, in order to situate the special status of data that are generated through interview/conversations.

Amos Hatch (1988) points out "When children define the interview context as a guessing game with the object of finding the answers the researcher expects, they are not able to respond as informants" (p. 7). Once again, this goes to the heart of how students perceive the situation. When they have only experienced adults in authority roles, particularly in school, there may be a tendency to mask any confusion they may experience, to cover up what they don't understand, and to generally give the adult what he or she wants to hear (Donaldson, 1978).

As one way of overcoming this challenge, Julia Ellis (1998) suggests that the researcher start with the "whole" person. Instead of focussing on a particular frontal assault form of direct inquiry, she suggests that the interpretive inquirer use open-ended interview questions/prompts which "appear to work by evoking a variety of memories, feelings, and categories of activity interviewees like to report" (p. 37). To this end, Ellis developed a series of questions that have proven to be successful in evoking salient student memories. For example, she suggests the researcher may ask the student to "Tell me about something you have done that really surprised other people" (p. 48). Prompts or invitations such as this indicate to the student/participants that their experiences are valued. They provide a context within which the interviewer can provide the occasional "navigational nudge" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) toward securing responses to the particular focussing questions that underwrite the inquiry.

In another "sideways-in" approach, Schoenfeld (1989) created a questionnaire designed to elicit students' views on learning in mathematics. The questions he posed suggest a number of prompts that may help students to begin a reflection on their learning. For my inquiry, I adapted ideas from both Ellis (1998) and Schoenfeld (1989) and used them as a guiding framework for my initial conversations with the students. Appendix B provides a partial listing of how these adaptations were developed. These prompts remained open to adaptation, as profitable directions often presented themselves during interactions with the students (Kvale, 1996; Weber, 1986).

Kvale suggests that "An interview is literally an *inter view*, an interchange of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest" (1996, p. 14, *original emphasis*). He further suggests that as a means of gathering data, an interview is a "conversation that has a structure and a purpose" (Kvale, 1996, p. 6). As I did not have unlimited access to the students and their views, and as I had indicated to the parents/guardians and to the teacher that the research would not significantly interfere with their learning program in the classroom, I had to develop a manageable framework for generating data. One of the ways that interviews can be structured is indicated in the work of Seidman (1998) who suggests a three interview schedule which works to help the participant to "reconstruct his or her experience within the topic under study" (p. 9). He suggests a semi-structured schedule which means that the "Open-ended, in-depth inquiry is best carried out in a structure that allows both the participant and the interviewer to maintain a sense of focus for each interview in the series" (Seidman, 1998, p. 13).

Ostensibly, the purpose of the first interview, which Seidman terms the "Focussed Life History" interview, is to put the participants' experiences in a context by having them tell as much as possible about themselves in light of the research question. Thus, from a content perspective, the first interview was structured to allow the students and me to explore some of their past experiences with learning in school. Of equal importance, these first interviews/conversations provided me with an opportunity to let the students know that I was just as interested in them as persons as I was in what they could or would share with me about their learning experiences. My aim was to develop the trusting relationship that might allow them to candidly and openly discuss their experiences with me in future interviews (Manning, 1997; Morse, 1994). Thus, this first interview served to establish not only a framework for the inquiry, but also the tone within which the next set of interviews would be conducted (Knupfer, 1996).

Seidman suggests that the second interview which he terms "The Details of Experience" builds upon the first, this time "concentrate[ing] on the concrete details of the participant's present experiences in the topic area of study" (p. 12). During this conversation, the researcher moves from a general orientation to the topic to talking about the participant's present and past experiences with the topic. My second conversation with each student revolved around or emanated from my classroom observations and our initial interview/conversation. The themes and topics I chose to focus on were based on my observations of the classroom activities, both in general and particular, that they had engaged in following our first conversation (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Using my field jottings and journal entries, I constructed an outline for the second round of conversations, and Appendix C details the interview schedule that I developed. During this conversation, I tended to use the questions and prompts as a guide rather than a prescription, and I often rephrased them depending upon which student I was talking with at the time. Thus, the second set of conversations yielded data generated around particular themes or strands, which, in turn allowed me to discern general and individual responses to, and interpretations of, specific activities in which they engaged.

The third interview suggested by Seidman focuses on having the participants reflect upon the meanings that have been developed over the course of the previous interviews. In addition, the students and I extended our "meanings" as we revisited some of the key ideas from the new perspectives that emerged. The whole interview process reflected the constant process of "looping back" as I revisited my original intents, conjectured on emerging metaphors and motifs, and reformulated new questions which related to the underlying theme of the inquiry. In a critical sense, each phase and aspect of the inquiry "push[ed] forward" (Kvale, 1996) those that followed.

The researcher's reflective journal and peer debriefing.

> Researchers make preconceived ideas explicit, monitor themselves by keeping a research journal of ongoing thoughts and feelings ... [with the aim to] ... enhance objectivity and decrease bias. (Hutchison & Wilson, 1994, p. 312)

A practice I developed during the familiarization phase of this inquiry was to maintain a journal. This was a useful practice as it served to guide and focus my observations, often providing opportunities for realigning or redirecting my observations and interactions with the students (Francis, 1995; Hart, 1998; Paley, 1996). It also provided a useful entry point for my discussions with my supervisor. In essence, this reflective journal provided the basis for peer debriefing, a procedure that entails the "involvement of colleagues, peers, mentors ... who can challenge and shock one out of habitual ways of thinking and experiencing" (Manning, 1997, p. 104). This element of the inquiry proved to be a productive tool for developing more fully informed interpretations of the students' perceptions. As Manning notes, "It is through this ... (internal) ... dialogue, as well as in conversations with respondents that meaningful and worthwhile interpretations emerge" (p. 104). John Smith (1992) further emphasizes that a distinctive aspect of interpretive inquiry is that the researcher approaches the inquiry from a reflective perspective. He points out that

> First, interpretivists hold that self-inquiry in the form of a diary and/or a self-history, can be an important way to proceed. Much can be learned from people

> who take a determinedly self-reflective stance toward their own reasons and motivations for doing what they do or have done and toward their understandings of their interactions with others. (p. 103)

Usually I reviewed my field notes and wrote a reflection or tentative interpretation on a regularly scheduled basis. These journal entries provided me with further prompts and ideas that I incorporated into the conversation/interview cycle that I developed. A summary of the research design is presented in Figure 2.

Analysis of the Data

The analysis of the data was conducted from a number of perspectives: analytic induction, constant comparison and typological analysis (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). Inductive analysis involved reading and re-reading the transcripts of the conversations I had with each of the students, sorting them into broad categories and identifying relationships. As a result of this analysis, I identified three clusters of related ideas:

- The students' personal characteristics as learners
- Their responses to specific classroom activities
- Their perspectives on learning.

These categories are constrained in a number of specific ways. The first category is limited to an overview of certain personal characteristics that may be generally associated with learning in school. I made no attempt to individually capture the whole child, and any information about their backgrounds, their home situations, or their personal lives was gathered incidentally. Thus, any "personal" information I gathered was based solely on my classroom observations and what they chose to share (and the manner in which they shared it) with me in our conversations.

In addition, the second category that relates to their general and particular responses to specific learning activities was essentially limited by the nature of the question/prompt protocol I used in the second set of conversations. The third category evolved from specific prompts and questions I provided for them, from my observations and from my review of particular "literatures" pertaining to the activities that they experienced in their learning day.

Overall, based on my decision to maintain my primary focus on the learning experiences of a particular group of eight students, I did not gather any data from their teacher or from any other personnel in the school.

The second step in the inquiry process was to juxtapose these three categories upon my observational field notes and TRAP journal reflections. This process of "constant comparison ... combines inductive category coding with a simultaneous comparison with all social incidents observed" (Goetz & LeCompte, p. 182). Thus, as a second step, I reviewed my field note-jottings and cross-referenced them to my journal entries. I matched pertinent observations with the discussions I had with the students, and essentially developed a more complete and thick description of what I saw as the primary influences upon the students' perspectives on learning.

In the final step I engaged in typological analysis which meant that I divided all the inquiry data into categories or themes and interpreted them from the perspective of the related literature and my own interpretive framework or horizon. Overall, this type of "... analysis can be viewed as a stage process by which a whole phenomenon is divided into its components and then reassembled under various new rubrics (Goertz & LeCompte, 1984, p. 192). Within this framework, I attempted to capture a sense of the complexity of student learning in schools.

Figure 2. Summary of the research design.

Research Activity	Purpose(s)
Phase One: Familiarization	
• Observations, group discussions, individual conversations	• To orient myself to the 'reality' of life in classrooms and to help me define my "role" as researcher. • To explore data generating possibilities • To develop important questions related to the topic of the inquiry
Phase Two: The Inquiry	
• Observations and field jottings/memos	• To develop entry lines of inquiry for interaction with individual students. • To note and record events or situations within which group and individual discussion may be situated.
• Group discussions	• To listen to student perspectives on learning within a collaborative setting. • To identify additional data gathering options.
• Extended interviews/conversations with individual students (based on parental consent) following the three stage interview framework suggested by Seidman (1998)	• To explore in depth the perceptions of individual students.
• Reflective journal and field notes	• To monitor and reflect upon the evolving interpretive account.
• Peer debriefing	• To review interpretations and emerging themes.
• Ongoing literature review	• To provide reference and interpretive sources related to emerging themes and motifs, and emergent puzzle situations.

Summary

In this chapter, I have provided the context for the inquiry, and I have suggested that the teachers in the school made a determined effort to create a positive learning environment for the students. I have provided an overview of the procedures I used to generate the data and have presented the analytic framework I used to interpret the data.

CHAPTER 6

THE INTERPRETIVE ACCOUNT PART A: THE STUDENTS

> Because cultural phenomena always can be further analyzed, subdivided and reconstituted, the final analysis represents an arbitrary stopping point established by the [researcher's] choice of the components to be studied, the data collection tools used, or depth of analysis to be accomplished.
>
> (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984, p. 189)

The interpretive account that is contained within the next three chapters starts with the "acknowledgement that children's worlds are different," and the presentation of my understanding of it may present something of an interpretive challenge for the reader. One way to read the account is to keep in mind that it consists of overlapping and interlocking layers of description each of which contributes toward the total interpretation that I developed within the hermeneutic circle. In essence, the account contains a pattern of meanings that requires the reader to consider the students' perspectives of learning (*what* they shared), as being situated within each student as a unique and special individual (*who* they are), and contextualized within the learning experiences they encountered in their classroom (*how* they acted). In other words, my perceptions of the perspectives that the students shared with me are intended to be situated in who they are and the contexts from which they drew their interpretations.

In this chapter, I present the eight students who participated with me in the inquiry. My particular intent here is to provide a sense of the students as "historical" rather than "eternal." Arguing from a Vygotskian perspective, Graue and Walsh (1998) point out that the major difference between the two conceptions is that "The historical child exists in real places in real time. She *(sic)* is not a representative sample, somehow timeless and without context [as is the depiction of the eternal child]" (p. 35). In essence, Graue and Walsh argue that childhood is not an amorphous stage of development, but a "continual construction" (p. 35) by individual and particular "kids".

Thus, interpretive inquiry that seeks the perspectives of children-as-students presents a challenge in that the students in the inquiry, as "historical children," consistently resist any attempt to sort them into categories, while the coding of thematic strands indicates the research necessity for "fitting them into" broad descriptive categories (Manning, 1997; Yin, 1994). Given the foregoing caveat, in the descriptions that follow I hope to make it obvious that even though I categorized them according to their responses as "students in school," they each remained unique and particular as children in their own right. In many ways this distinction points up one of the major differences between research efforts that are designed to investigate the effects of teaching on students as a "historical" group and interpretive research that seeks to understand the meanings that schooling has for each particular "eternal" child.

The School as a Backdrop to the Inquiry

The school was designated as an "inner-city" school, and a number of factors contribute to this classification. In the first place, the school was situated within an area of the city that earned it the designation as an "urban poor school," which meant that the school was located in an area in which between 31-40.9% of the residents were poor (Maynes, 1990). In addition to drawing students from "poor" families, the school also drew students from the ethnically and culturally diverse community that surrounded it. In fact, the school was centred within the Chinese, Vietnamese and "Little Italy" commercial and cultural communities, which resulted in a diverse school population. The students who were participants in the inquiry reflected this ethnic and cultural diversity, and I had students whose backgrounds were British, Chinese, Italian, Polish, Laotian, Portuguese, and Vietnamese. Although the influence of their home and community life does play a role in the way students view learning (Bempechat, 1998; Delpit, 1992; Gibson & Ogbu, 1991), time and the research focus I had set did not allow me to investigate in depth the ways in which the students' background affected their learning. However, it was of particular interest for me to note that the students in the study did not appear to come from "poor" families. Most of them indicated that they, or their parents chose to attend the school and four of them were driven to the school by their parents. In addition, six of the students had personal computers at home and three were being tutored or attending enrichment classes. From a research perspective, this diversity, this heterogeneity contributed directly to the richness of the data that were generated in the course of the inquiry, and furthermore, the diversity also contributed to a more fully informed interpretive account than I had originally anticipated.

Classifying the Students' Responses to Classroom Activities

My observations of and interactions with the eight students (Marion, Keith, Jonathon, Gerri, Lina, Andy, Nadia, and Arthur) indicated that each of them dealt with the daily learning routines and demands of the classroom with varying degrees of efficacy. Some of the students demonstrated a reasonably functional grasp of how learning was supposed to proceed in the classroom while there were those who often overtly demonstrated various degrees of ongoing confusion. In a sense, the students could be placed on a continuum that reflected the degree to which each student was able to independently navigate within the classroom learning activities.

Educational resilience

From one perspective this ability to adapt to and operate within the classroom learning environment and has been termed "educational resiliency" (Masten, 1994; Wang & Gordon, 1994). Resilience is viewed as "the capacity of individuals to overcome personal vulnerabilities and environmental adversities effectively or the ability to thrive physically and psychologically despite adverse circumstances ..." (Wang, Haertel and Walberg, 1998, p. 3). The depiction of resilient students was derived from an extensive review of the research into "effective schools" conducted by Wang, Haertel & Walberg, (1993). They felt that their synthesis of the research into effective schools provided support for their contention that "effective schools" are essentially those that promote and encourage the development of resiliency in their students. Although their findings have been disputed on methodological and philosophical grounds (Levin, 1993; Palinscar & McPhail, 1993), from their distillation of the research, Wang et al. (1993) claim that, given the right combination of conditions, circumstances, and pedagogical practice, children can indeed develop those attributes of resiliency deemed necessary for success in schools. According to Wang and her colleagues, these key attributes include:

- high verbal fluency
- a sense of competence
- high self-esteem
- self-reliance or independence
- openness to new experiences

Overall, Wang, Haertel and Walberg (1998) conclude "Two of the most salient characteristics of resilient students are their high level of engagement and sense of 'personal agency.' [Which means that] ... Resilient children engage in many activities and believe that they themselves determine their lives" (p. 3). They subsequently suggest that children whose primary Discourses are not synchronous with those of schooling (and most often these Discourses are those which children who attend "inner-city" schools bring with them) need to develop personal resiliency if they are to learn and succeed in school.

The foregoing depiction of resiliency is fraught with shortcomings, not the least of which are the problems associated with casting student learning as occurring within a context that requires them to overcome "personal and environmental adversities. Notwithstanding, many of the "resiliency" characteristics described by Wang and her colleagues were those I observed and noted as being present (or absent) in the students. In general, it was the students' overall sense of "personal agency" that appeared to play a central role in how they viewed and engaged in learning. The students who displayed "high personal agency" were those who tended to be assertive and in control within the parameters for behavior established by the teacher. They were reasonably independent, tended to respond to their classroom experiences constructively, and generally appeared to be positively oriented to their experiences (Pelletier, 1994). In contrast, the "low personal agency" students often appeared lost and confused, and they displayed many of the characteristics associated with learned helplessness in the classroom (Langer & Park, 1990). Overall it appeared that these students could discern (or create) little of personal relevance in their classroom activities.

Based on my observations over an extended period of time during which I recorded their responses to a wide range of classroom activities and my formal and informal interactions with the eight students, I placed them in a very approximate manner on a "resiliency continuum" with the caveat that it is applicable only in the particular situation and context in which my observations were made. In the next three chapters, I describe in more detail how I arrived at the conclusions about the students' personal agency and I provide illustrative examples to support my conclusions. Table 1 is intended to summarize in a general way how I arrived at my overall conclusion about the relative strength of each student's personal agency.

Table 1: Indicators of student resiliency.

	Verbal fluency	Sense of competence	Self-esteem	Self-reliance/ Independence	Openness to new experiences	**Overall Personal agency**
Marion	+	+	+	+	+	+
Keith	+	+	O	O	+	+
Jonathon	+	+	+	+	+	+
Gerri	O	+	O	+	+	+
Lina	—	O	—	+	—	—
Andy	—	—	—	+	—	—
Nadia	—	—	—	+	—	—
Arthur*	O	—	+	O	O	+

+ = High **O = Medium** **— = low.**

*Arthur's "profile" indicates one of the major shortcoming of taxonomies such as this one and why this is so will become apparent in my discussion of Arthur as participant in the inquiry.

The High Personal Agency Students

From the viewpoint of personal agency, I considered four of the eight students, Marion, Keith, Jonathon, and Gerri, as reasonably confident and competent in most classroom situations. These students generally demonstrated the ability to work effectively with and within the daily classroom routines and requirements. In almost all situations and "subject areas", they were the ones who asked and answered the majority of the teacher-to-whole-class questions. They tended to be task oriented and reliable in terms of productivity, and they did not hesitate to check with the teacher to ensure that they were on track with their class assignments. They appeared to take it for granted that they would do well in school and they shared with me a number of strategies that illustrated their grasp of the school "game", a game that included giving the teacher what he wanted, and knowing when it was propitious to appear interested and academically engaged. In group activities, they tended to take a leadership role and were generally regarded by the other students as knowing how to do things. Each of these students had been with the teacher the year before as part of the Grade 5/6 split class and they had experienced what they considered to be the oppressive influence of the Grade 6 students. Ultimately, a good deal of their personal confidence appeared to emanate from their perceived "liberation" from the more threatening and dominating students of their previous year's class.

Jonathon

Jonathon had been at the school since Grade 2. The reason he attended the school was because "My Mom … doesn't think it [the school closest to them] would be good, so she wants me to come here!" For four of the eight students in the study, this was also the case; they (or their parents) chose to come to the school, a decision that often required their parents to transport them to the school at their personal expense.

Jonathon benefited quite obviously from being with the teacher the year before and he did indeed "emerge" over the two years of the inquiry. When I observed and spoke with him when he was a Grade 5 student the previous year, he seldom, if ever spoke up in class and was usually quite docile or compliant in group activities. However, this all changed in the next year. When I asked him, "How are you different this year?" He replied, "I wasn't picked on that much … Now I'm in Grade 6, no one picks on me that much because I'm equal with them, and they don't tease or bother me in class."

Based on my observations of Jonathon from the previous year, this growth in his personal efficacy and new found (or won) self-confidence was obvious, and there were many occasions when he clearly demonstrated his sense of control over classroom routines and activities. His strong verbal abilities allowed him to assume a form of leadership role whenever the students worked in groups. Along with Marion, Keith, and RJ (a student who was not in the study), Jonathon usually took care of the management of group assignments. Working within the guidelines provided by the teacher, he usually decided on who would be responsible for completing specific tasks, he set deadlines and production quotas, acted as quality controller, and generally organized and kept the group on task.

Unlike many of the other students in the class, Jonathon enjoyed reading and apparently needed no external incentives such as assigned book reports that were marked by his teacher to induce him to read. In fact, after one conversation, he enthusiastically persuaded me to read a book in which "Animorphs" are the central characters (the book was part of a series of Animorph stories that was his favorite reading choice). Overall, Jonathon appeared to have a firm grasp on what was required to be successful in this particular class and he viewed school as an important part of his life, currently and in the future.

Marion

Like Jonathon, Marion always appeared to be comfortable with herself and in our conversations was the most verbal and coherent of all the students. She credited this to her outgoing and gregarious nature. When I observed, "You did very well in the class presentations" (a group project in Social Studies), she responded, "Yeah, I like to talk. Everyone in my family talks a lot and we even talk to our dog. I'm not shy. I like to talk to people … tell what we did."

Marion was looked up to as a leader by the other girls in the class, and they, as well as the majority of the boys, liked to be in her group. With some notable exceptions, she was mostly willing to help and contribute to group discussions and activities. She was generally chosen by the school principal to take leadership roles in school-community programs and she was the captain of the school patrollers. At times she evinced a flair for the dramatic and indicated that she was eagerly anticipating going to a Junior High school that was generally acknowledged for its focus on the fine arts curriculum. She lived close to the school and had attended it since kindergarten. She considered herself to be one of the top students in the class. When I asked her "How are your writing skills?" She replied "I think they're very good … like in LA, I write and I enjoy it and I've always been a good writer."

Marion also felt that she benefited from her previous year's experiences with Mr. T. when she was in the Grade 5 group. She explained: "Well, like, last year we were the youngest in our class 'cause we were in Grade 5 … in the split … and this year we're the oldest and this year we have a really small class. There's only 16 kids and we get more attention … one on one." She enjoyed attention and it showed particularly when she was engaged in the group presentations that she usually coordinated. In terms of her personal agency, she equitably accepted the day-to-day classroom routines and activities and inevitably demonstrated conscientious effort in her learning.

Keith

Keith appeared to enjoy talking with me and, like the other high agency students seemed to be comfortable interacting with adults. He had very clear and consistent opinions about most aspects of classroom life. He was perceptive and certainly the most openly "aware" of all the students in the study. Like Marion and Jonathon, he had been with Mr. T. the year before and, although he enjoyed the class, he was often somewhat perturbed by the predictability of some of the daily lessons. When we discussed the fact that they were covering essentially the same math concepts as the year before, the following exchange occurred:

> JP: So is it [the math class] any easier or ...?
>
> Keith: It's pretty much the same, 'cause last year I knew how to do graphs.
>
> JP: You already knew it? So, this is your third time around … for the graphs? Does it get any easier or...is it any more helpful or...?
>
> Keith: Pretty much the same. It's like ...exact the same thing that we did last year …
>
> JP: So … is that helping you?
>
> Keith: Well I knew - well a little bit cos I know exactly what we're gonna do. Just like [he assumes the teacher's voice] "We're going to do another graph now … we're going to do a bar graph today … and then we're going to do a cluster graph and then we're going to do…" [resumes his voice] and so on and so on...
>
> JP: Does that help your learning do you think? Having done it before?
>
> Keith: No! [Laughs] … Kind of like you're learning it from a machine … So? … What's the point!

In the course of our conversations, Keith was the only student in the study who openly acknowledged that the curriculum was not overly challenging for him. In contrast, Marion, Jonathon, and Gerri, although they benefited substantially in many ways from their previous encounters with the curriculum, did not (or could not) acknowledge the benefits that accrued to them from having encountered a similar version of the curriculum in the previous year. They preferred to maintain that their personal growth had come by virtue of them becoming more effective learners or as a result of their increased personal efforts. In a general sense whether they acknowledged the source of their personal efficacy or not, the students' view of their personal adequacy as a learner played an important role in allowing them to cope with most of the challenges they had with learning in the classroom.

Keith tended to become more emotionally involved than the other students did. Of all the students, he was the one who was most likely to directly question or challenge the teacher and several times he became quite indignant when he felt that the teacher was rejecting his argument or perspective out of hand. He was extremely pragmatic when it came to working with his group, and he was consistently sensitive to the need to produce evidence for the teacher of his personal effectiveness as a learner. He was being tutored in math on Saturday mornings at a local college and considered that this was beneficial as he already had a reasonable grasp of most of the "Grade 8 math concepts." The repetition of previously presented math concepts by the teacher was another source of his frustration in the math class; however, he seldom gave any overt indicators that he was frustrated in class and he only referred to it at my prompting. In the overall scheme of things, it was obvious that the learning agenda in the class did not represent a high degree of challenge for him, which, in a somewhat paradoxical sense, contributed to both Keith's sense of frustration and his efficacy as a learner.

Gerri

Gerri was a quietly proficient and industrious student, and in terms of her personal confidence and outlook, she could be classed as having a high sense of personal agency. Not as outgoing or gregarious as the previous three, she tended to accept the classroom routines and procedures and to work within them. She was consciously concerned about her school achievement and, although I never did observe any instances where the students compared their achievements with each other, she indicated to me that she surreptitiously monitored her learning status within the class. In her personal estimation of her abilities, she felt that she had had a successful year.

When we discussed her achievement, her appraisal, although somewhat cryptic was direct and honest.

JP: How have you done this year?
Gerri: Pretty good I think my average is about 90 in all subjects.
JP: An honor student! How did you do it? Did a small class help?
Gerri: Yah! I worked hard and I paid attention and some years I was in a class of like 30 and this year I got like more attention 'cause less people.

In class, she usually appeared quite relaxed and comfortable with the teacher and her peers, and I got the impression that she was the most willing of all the students to share and help others in group situations. She assiduously attended in class, followed directions and seldom asked questions of the teacher. Of all of her experiences, she selected her appearance in the "Midsummer's Nights Dream" (a play that was developed in the school with the help of a professional acting troupe) as the highlight of the year.

JP: "Midsummer Night's Dream," … what was the best part?
Gerri: Me … dying!
JP: What about the presentation [of the play to the parents] how did it go?
Gerri: It was good. Everyone did well. Everyone knew the lines.
JP: Was it different from rehearsing?
Gerri: I think it was different 'cause it was different now you're in front of a big audience and in front of parents … my parents didn't go.
JP: Would you want to do it again?
Gerri Good experience for me if I wanted to go to … [the local Fine Arts Jr. High] … then it would be something I had to have, like, ... in drama
JP: Good for you! … Did you learn about yourself?
Gerri: I knew I could act!

I had watched the rehearsals for the play and the evening "gala" performance, and I had observed the other students' enthusiastic reaction to Gerri's melodramatic and humorous "dying" performance in the concluding scene. During these short periods, she had been the "star", and based on this brief experience she now knew she "could act."

The Low Personal Agency Students

Lina

Lina brought a tremendous *joie de vivre* to her life in and out of the classroom. She demonstrated ongoing enthusiasm for and commitment to almost every activity in which she engaged. Her enthusiasm was often tempered by the fact that she appeared unsure of what she was supposed to do with her assignments or during the class activities. For example, Mr. T. assigned them to independently read a novel on their own time and to produce a "poster" that demonstrated their understanding of the key elements of the story. Lina explained her understanding of the assignment this way:

> JP: So you did the book report poster. How did you enjoy doing that?
> Lina: I don't like it. Like, you have to read the book and then you have to, like, finish by the end of the week and sometimes I just, like, … the book and one time I would, like, another book and then I don't have much time reading it, and sometimes at nighttime I can read it but other times I am really, really tired and I don't read it and I go to sleep.
> JP: Then you had to do the poster … was that useful?
> Lina: Yeah it was OK. It helped me to understand the story, like, who was the character and who was the setting was and how … the story was … .
> JP: What would you prefer to do when you read a book?
> Lina Huhh … just tell him like the character … is... sometimes, like, we don't have enough time to, like, do all the ... . right? But sometimes, just say about the book that you read, like, a book about the moon and if someone forgot, like, to read a book before and ...: uhmm … know what it about and then so the very next time to get out to read and then if we put it down poster and ... it be useful for them to take the book out.
> JP: Like, it might help somebody else?
> Lina: Uhmm … yah!
> JP: Any suggestions for teachers that would help you to read?
> Lina: Uh huh huh huh .... Nooo … they are good!

This exchange is illustrative of the tenor and flow of a great deal of our conversations. Quite often, Lina struggled to explain clearly or recount what she had experienced in the classroom. Although she had attended the school since Grade 1, she still had substantial problems both with her fluency and her ability to explain her experiences adequately. To various degrees the problems she had expressing her ideas were similar to those experienced by Andy and to a lesser extent by Nadia and Arthur. In contrast to the problems she had explaining her experiences with learning, when we discussed topics of interest to her Lina was reasonably articulate and clear. Perhaps a plausible explanation for Lina's apparently confused response is that she did not understand what she was supposed to do in order to represent her interpretation of the book in the assigned way. In many respects the problem she had with expressing herself in both her talk and writing relating to class activities contributed to some of the problems she experienced with her learning. Despite this particular challenge, Lina remained always enthusiastic and considered herself to be very fortunate to be able to attend school. Above all, she felt that it was very important to put forth her best effort all the time, as this exchange demonstrates:

> JP: I hear you saying you're really fortunate. Any advice to new Grade 6 students?
>
> Lina: I forgot what I wrote. [The students had written some "advice" as an activity in class] By doing best and being confident in yourself and don't come to school with a sad face. Come with a happy face; don't come and feel terrible inside and be open to everybody and don't ... . Do ... just do homework. Do your best; nobody's perfect, so just do your best.
>
> JP: What does it mean to be perfect?
>
> Lina: I don't know ... maybe 100% and if smart then they be very popular.
>
> JP: Like, is no one perfect?
>
> Lina Ah no ... people make mistake, and I make mistake too sometime, and you make mistake too!

Within this sunny outlook, Lina's consuming ambition was to meet the "Backstreet Boys" (a currently popular singing group I understand from her) and she spent any "free" computer time surfing the web for information about them. It was of more than passing interest to me how coherent she became when she informally discussed the activities and lives of the Backstreet Boys with me.

Nadia and Andy

Of the eight students, Andy and Nadia appeared to have the least developed sense of personal efficacy. In class, they both gave continuous indications that they were generally overcome by the demands of the classroom. In my field observations, I recorded countless occasions when they both appeared to be almost overwhelmed by the demands placed upon them. Often whole mornings would pass without them providing any observable indicators that they were engaged in learning. They appeared to me as lost souls adrift in a sea of directions and explanations, buffeted by confusing forces over which they had no control. In many ways, classroom life did not appear to make any substantive connections with what they brought to it, and the more they experienced it, the more disconnected it became.

Nadia

Nadia had been in the school since Kindergarten and when I asked her "What is the best part of coming to this school?" She replied, "Uhmmm … the program, like, the cooking program from 4 o'clock to 6 o'clock during the school." She was referring to an after-school program at the school, but she subsequently revealed that she was not sure if it was scheduled during the current year or if she recalled it from previous years. In some ways her inability to recall anything of note from her school experiences represents what Jonathon Osborne (2000) terms an "unconstructed absence", wherein the student does not or cannot attach any particular significance to her experiences. Such unconstructed absences were evident in the way she most often responded to my prompts and questions with either, "I don't know," or "uh uh"! Jonathon Osborne further suggests that the "I don't know" response may originate when the student really has no idea what is being discussed and therefore, has no basis for response, or the student's "ignorance" is an active choice based on the student's perception that there are more important things to think and talk about, or the student decides that the topic is of marginal interest, and is irrelevant to his or her present life situation. Most often, I suspected that Nadia had little choice in her responses, as she had become so used to not understanding her school discourse with teachers and other adults that she responded automatically, habitually and immediately with this form of disclaimer. However, this was not the case when our conversations became more personally relevant. On these occasions, Nadia did attempt to rationalize her lack of understanding of what was happening to her in the classroom (in a sense, a form of resilient behaviour), as the following exchange illustrates:

> JP: In the Greek project, you ended up working on your own. How did that work?
>
> Nadia: Kinda fine. I liked it 'cause there wouldn't be anybody in your group to bug you or anything, and then you'll be the only person left out and you won't get to do anything 'cause, like, when we're in groups, I'm always left out and, like, I don't have nothing to do so I get bad marks and when I'm by myself I can do everything by myself, and I learn things by doing everything by myself.
>
> JP: Two ideas: I would like you to tell me about: In the group you get left out and you get a "bad mark"?
>
> Nadia: Yeah, because you didn't do anything; so Mr. T. counts that as a mark, like nothing and I get bad marks. Then the Greece project I finally got to do by myself and I got kind of a good mark.

This exchange indicates important aspects of the challenges Nadia faced in this particular class situation. Nadia appeared to spend considerable time in class trying to sort out and rationalize for herself why she was sometimes not included in group projects. She indicated on several occasions an even bigger ongoing concern for her, the fact that, even when she was in a group she was often "left out." It was obvious that she was not alone in this respect; for overtly or indirectly, and in much more subtle ways, the other low agency students were often "left out" of group learning activities. In addition, despite her claim that she learned best on her own and that she "can do everything by myself," this was not evident when I observed her in the classroom. In reality, she seldom demonstrated an ability to learn by herself. In fact, during the times I observed in the class, she spent a great deal of her time ostensibly avoiding engagement with the task prescribed by the teacher, often playing with or examining items in her desk, organizing her materials, or simply appearing innocuous. She gave me every indication that she was abstracted from the general flow of the classroom. In many ways, I felt that this was one of the primary defences she had developed in order to protect herself from the personal problems she experienced trying to learn in an almost alien environment.

Andy

In our conversations and in the classroom in general, Andy, like Nadia and Lina, clearly had problems expressing his ideas. In addition, he usually demonstrated a palpable lack of confidence in himself and his abilities. Several aspects of his insecurity are illustrated in the following extract from a longer conversation we had:

> JP: How have you done in this school?
> Andy: Kind of good.
> JP: Help me out a little … What does that mean?
> Andy: Uhhum … I don't know.
> JP: Does that mean you got good marks or …?
> Andy: Sometimes get good marks and sometimes I get bad marks.
> JP: So it's been kind of up and down, but you've enjoyed it? Being at this school?
> Andy: Yeah!
> JP: OK, if I asked you what was the best thing about going to school what would you say?
> Andy: Uhmm … I live near here and a long time ago it was a good school, no bad things happen like shooting or stealing.
> JP: When we were talking in our group, we were talking about competition. Do you think competition is important in school?
> Andy: No, because ... they would get in trouble, and in competition they would take away the test and say no competition or the person will cry if they got a bad mark or something.

His closing comment echoed a general sentiment that flowed through most of his talk with me about school. It appeared and one of his primary goals in school was to stay out of trouble. In addition, Andy often appeared to be confused about how the various aspects of school related to him. In his final response to me, he appears to equate competition with copying on tests, which he sees as a practice that has severe consequences, one which would reduce him to tears. In subsequent conversations I sensed that, although he had attended the school since kindergarten, he remained quite unsure of how the school as a "system" worked. Andy generally saw school as a threatening place, despite his belief that "no bad things happen." He often referred to students being punished and the need for him to behave. His view of learning was one that was tied intimately to being good and conforming to what he understood to be his teacher's behavioural expectations. He appeared to believe that if he just kept quiet and did not attract attention to himself, he would be successful in school, as is perhaps illustrated in this exchange:

JP: Would that help [for him to talk with his group partners]?

Andy: I forgot! ... When you're helping tell how to do and what to do.

JP: So, when you get assignments are you always sure what to do?

Andy: Uhhhmmm, ... a little bit.

JP: What do you do when you're not sure?

Andy: I ask some help from partner or teacher.

JP: How often do you ask the teacher?

Andy: Uhhhhmmm a couple times.

JP: You don't ask very often. Are you pretty sure what you're supposed to be doing?

Andy: Uhhhmmm ... Yah! You're s'posed to be working on what you're assigned for; no fooling around, like talking or stuff.

To a certain extent, Andy's confusion as to how his learning was supposed to proceed in the classroom resulted from the conflicting overt and "subtle" messages about learning that he received from his interactions with his teacher, his peers, and the "system" of schooling generally. For students like Andy, who was often left to his own devices to figure how to actually go about learning, the system provided somewhat conflicting messages. For instance, when he was required to work independently, Andy appeared to be unwilling to ask his teacher for help because it might indicate that he had been "fooling around" or not listening. When he was in a group, he appeared to assume that silent application would provide a favourable indication to the teacher that he wasn't "fooling around". His perceptions of how to behave correctly inevitably took precedence over his need to understand what he was required to learn.

Both in class and in my interactions with him, Andy evinced a basic insecurity, and like Nadia, demonstrated his frustration and confusion with the situation by usually responding "I don't know" to many of my questions and prompts. And it was true, although he had been in the school since kindergarten, he did not appear to adequately comprehend what was happening in the classroom, and he appeared to not to have developed any strategies for dealing with the situation except to withdraw and allow the situation to unfold around him. In many ways, his personal agency was constrained and limited by a situation over which he felt he had no control. I often got the impression that his frustration brought him close to tears and the primary characteristic he looked for in a partner was someone who would "be kind." He lacked any form of explanatory framework that might enable him to account for his situation. Meanwhile, his attempt to internalize the teacher's procedural explanations (and the discourse of schooling in general) was translated into somewhat inadequate behavioural guidelines ("NO talking" and "NO fooling around") for how he was supposed to learn and exist in the classroom. In one sense, by allowing himself to be determined by other people's explanations and actions he avoided the risk of confrontation and decreased his encounters with traumatic experiences. However, in this avoidance, he had developed a pattern of compliant responses that denied his personal confidence and efficacy (Bowers, 1974). Most often in class he appeared lost. He appeared unable to fully comprehend the explanations or procedures of either his teacher or his peers, and he was left vulnerable and confused. As was apparent from his responses to me, he did not know why, nor did he have any personal resources available that would enable him to overcome the situation. Thus, the more he continued to be immersed in the process of schooling, the more dis-abled he became.

Arthur

Arthur's Mom chose to transport him to the school each day (a considerable distance), and had done so since he was in kindergarten, and Arthur believed that the school was the best one for him. Although he had ongoing "learning" problems, over time he had learned to adapt to the school "game" in a number of ways. He certainly was the most passionate and overtly engaged student in the class; however, his sense of competency appeared to be undermined by his inability to adequately deal with the learning tasks in the classroom. In many ways his sense of personal agency and competency was compromised by the frustration he felt with what he perceived to be a lack of appropriate skills. On several occasions during our conversations, Arthur went into lengthy detail as to how his particular problems with reading and spelling were the source of his difficulties in the classroom. However, despite his literacy shortcomings, he showed considerable strength when he presented oral reports to the class, and he particularly reveled in occasions when his classmates asked questions that required him to explain his understanding at length. In addition, he appeared to be a competent auditory learner, and he was at his best when learning involved active manipulation of materials. In most of the class activities, including those that involved reading and writing (and spelling, his consuming problem), he usually gave the appearance of being actively engaged. However, there were particular times when he appeared very much "turned off" or "tuned out" from what was occurring in the class. He was not alone in this respect and the "opting out" strategy was one that I observed in each of the students.

Arthur was an avid sports fan, particularly Italian soccer, and he could cite all pertinent statistics and discuss the world soccer situation in great detail. He enjoyed engaging me in hallway dialogues on the merits of Italian soccer relative to those of British soccer, and he inevitably wore a soccer shirt to school. An interesting aspect of his consuming interest in sport was that he was the student who protested most adamantly that learning in school should not be a competition. In reality, he appeared to very conscious of the need to complete tasks quickly (before the other students). In other words, I sensed that external demonstrations relating to his personal productivity provided some form of compensation or "cover" for many of the problems that Arthur realized he had.

Despite all the literacy challenges he faced, it was interesting that, in most situations, Arthur outwardly displayed a great deal of self-confidence and enthusiasm. In a rather perverse way, the self-confident persona he displayed worked against him as it did not allow him to ask the teacher for help. To do so would have indicated that he was unsure and as he evinced an attitude that he could be successful in all of the learning tasks assigned by the teacher, his perception of his personal credibility would have been undermined. In the final analysis, he considered that he had had a successful elementary school career. In our last conversation, he shared this perspective with me:

JP: Looking back what are some highlights [of the year]?
Anthony: Hockey and our intramural team.
JP: Anything else?
Anthony: Uhmmmm … social was fun and that's about it.
JP: How has the year gone for you; was it successful?
Anthony: Yah! Everything they taught us through the years at … [the school]!
JP: Just this year?
Anthony: Everything!
JP: Academic and playing?
Anthony: Yah!
JP: So, how have your marks been?
Anthony: Good! Out of a 100, I've done about 80. I've only failed one or two tests.
JP: Which Junior High are you going to?
Anthony: (A school) … by the army base in … (another suburb)
JP: Why there?
Anthony: It's a good school 'cause [He named another school he could have gone to in the district] doesn't give as much help.
JP: What are you looking forward to in particular?
Anthony: The sports and the school. See what it's like and they teach good but they ain't doing so good in some things I signed up for, but if you don't wanna go you can skip it!

Arthur's responses give the appearance of blithe confidence and, from the tenor of his responses alone, he comes over as an active decision-maker in matters related to his learning. But this perception is somewhat illusionary, for in the class, he spent a great deal of energy masking or covering up his problems with reading and writing. He felt that he knew how to solve his problem (by learning what he termed, the "sounds"), but the prescribed school's language arts program did not include phonics instruction in Grade 6. Whether such instruction would have solved Arthur's problem is an open question; however, as Delpit (1993) has pointed out, when the distance between the classroom program/curriculum and the actual learning needs of the student is of considerable proportions, the result is usually continuing frustration for the student both with learning and the demands of schooling in general.

The Students' Responses to Their School Experiences

Like Lina, Andy, and Nadia, Arthur appeared to experience a great deal of frustration in his encounters with learning in the classroom. For any number of reasons, the prescribed curriculum which he experienced (and apparently had experienced to this point in school), even though it was derived from what might be considered to be sound theoretical learning principles, did not appear to respond adequately to what he needed in order to learn. In addition, it appeared that the low agency students had not learned or developed (or been taught) personal strategies that would allow them to overcome the obstacles and demands that they faced in the classroom. The high agency students, on the other hand, felt secure in their ability to handle the situations that arose in the classroom. For example, in my final conversation with Jonathon, he shared the following perspective:

> JP: What personal qualities does it take to succeed?"
> Jonathon: Mmm … like, you know, when do a test, ask the teacher. Some people have too much pride, like, they don't know how to ask for it so like … .
> JP: Any other?
> Jonathon: Like learning and pay attention and listen.

> JP: Have you become more confident?
> Jonathon: Umhum ... more confident and I take more responsibility for myself. Like patrolling, I have to come 10 minutes early so I have to go to sleep early and I'm confident that I can do it. And I volunteer to do more work like in senior home and help out at dinner and stuff.

It is apparent that Jonathon believes he can take care of himself in most situations and he is confident that he can cope with any new challenges that might arise for him. He was confidently looking forward to moving on to Junior High school and he talked about his prospects in this way,

> JP: What does it mean to be smart?
> Jonathon: Like, being overachiever and do good on tests and do good at school and remember what you learn.
> JP: Will this be useful going to Junior High?
> Jonathon: Yeah, 'cause if I think that I'm smarter. I'll be able to cope with Junior High. It's going to be challenging but I'm ready for the challenge 'cause I study lots.
> JP: So you're more confident! What might be challenges in Junior High?
> Jonathon: Might be working on projects alone and harder assignments, meeting new friends and everything will be harder than Grade 6.
> JP: What will help you the most?
> Jonathon: Studying and learning about the stuff and looking it up. I would look it up so I would know the next day about it.

Marion also talked about her self-confidence and the role it played in her life. When I asked her "... what have you learned this year?" she replied, "I learned a lot like the basic things and leadership and working in groups and stuff and, ... Oh yah! ... good independent skills too!" Marion identified her role as captain of the school patrollers as being one of the highlights of her year. It is of more than passing interest to note that in order to be student "leaders", the students needed to be nominated and appointed by their teacher and the school administrators. My perception was that such experiences contributed to their personal efficacy, confidence and independent decision-making abilities. It was also apparent that this affirmative way of thinking about themselves and their possibilities spilled over into their responses to the classroom activities. In the classroom they tended to be proactive in their approach to learning, they asked questions, they were inevitably the ones who responded to the teacher's questions, and they seized upon any opportunities to "demonstrate" their abilities as learners to their teachers. As a result, the personal interpretive circle that was created for and by them was self-sustaining. In the final analysis, it was their sense of self that emerged as a major factor in their ability to flourish in the classroom, and this view was a direct outgrowth of the opportunities they were afforded to develop and practice their personal efficacy. In other words, it appeared that the critical self-sustaining characteristics of personal agency they needed to succeed were not inherent personality traits. They learned them within the situations and contexts created by their teacher in particular, and the school in general.

In direct contrast to the awareness that students such as Marion and Jonathon demonstrated, the low agency students seldom talked about a need to be in control of their own responses to be, in a sense, self-actualizing individuals. For example, Nadia shared this perspective with me in our closing conversation:

JP: Looking back, what's the best thing that happened in Grade 6 for you
Nadia: Uhmm, uhmmm … [long pause] … Uhmmm [long pause] …
JP: What's one thing?
Nadia: The reading challenges.
[The teachers and students had a "reading challenge" a "competition based on which group could read the most. The students had to complete a "reading passport" as part of the contest.]
JP: Did you complete the reading passport?
Nadia: [Nods]
JP: Anything else?
Nadia: Uhmmmm … (pause) … uhmmmmm. I can't think of anything?
JP: What was one of the hardest things?
Nadia: Like exams!
JP: How have you done in Grade 6
Nadia: Kind of good and kind of bad.
JP: How do you know you've done kind of good
Nadia: The report cards and I know more than I knew last year.
JP: Any reason for doing better?

Nadia: I don't know.
JP: What was "bad" about this year
Nadia: Uhmmmm … pause … I don't know.
JP: Did you enjoy the year?
Nadia: Kinda
JP: Which was your best subject this year
Nadia: Uhmm … a learning subject? Uhmmm I think math.

The reading challenge was indeed "fun" for the students, as the teachers had to dye their hair when they "lost". In this situation, there was no pressure on the students to fulfill assigned "work"; all they needed was their parent's signature confirming that they had read at home. However, in an overall sense, for Nadia and Andy trying to identify significant experiences for the year was a challenge. Nadia's unhappy, sometimes painful, struggle to come to grips with her life in the classroom, coupled with the fact that she was given very few if any responsibilities in the class or the school meant that she had few options to choose from as "special" occurrences to celebrate or share. Her choice of math as her "best subject" is interesting, as my observations of her responses to math activities indicated that it was seldom a particularly enjoyable experience for her. I could not help but feel that she selected it only because it was the subject that caused her the least discomfort. It is also interesting to me that, in this conversation, I missed her reference to math as a "learning subject." In retrospect, I can only conjecture how Nadia would describe the rest of her encounters in the classroom, aside from those with "learning subjects."

The students who demonstrated high personal agency inevitably attributed some of their success and achievements to their efforts, in effect, they saw themselves as in control. When I asked them about success in school, Keith replied, "It's a matter of if you work hard and study hard." Gerri explained her success by noting, "Yah! I worked hard and I paid attention." Lina felt that success required "doing your best, and listen, and get your reports done, and be happy to get an education." Jonathon summarized his views this way: "Listen to the teacher, studying…, doing well, avoid fights, no talking in class, no detentions, don't be afraid to ask for help if you need it!"

In contrast, when I talked with Andy about his future plans, the following exchange occurred,

JP: So after you go to Junior High what's after that? Do you know?
Andy: No, I'm going to high school at … maybe … .
JP: After High School, what then?
Andy: I'm not going to do anything for the future
JP: So, you'll graduate and then what? Are you hoping you will get some advice from someone?
Andy: Yes someone in the future, like a smart person!
JP: Anything you would like to do? [Pause] … any special interests?
Andy Uhmm … I have to see if they got special interest in … I need some advice.

In many ways, Andy's concluding remark summarizes a key element of the perspective generally evinced by the low agency students. In Andy's view, he would have to wait until someone else told him what his interests were. Essentially, he was alienated from his personal learning experiences, and more importantly and somewhat tragically, from his sense of self. Bowers (1974) writes

> In effect, the existential mood we associate with being alienated tends to restrict imagination and to erode one's will to act. In not being meaningfully involved in an experience the individual tends to act more passively and thus, to not take responsibility. Events control his behavior, not because he believes in them or has a deep sense of commitment but because his level of personal involvement is so low he ceases to exercise his own imagination or to take responsibility. (p. 76)

Alienation, in a sense, is the reverse image of personal agency. In Bower's estimation, "alienation … erodes one's will to act" and this existential ennui was evident in both the talk and the classroom behaviors of the low agency students. It was also apparent that the efforts they made to engage in the internal mental dialogue necessary for coming to grips with their classroom learning (Ames & Ames, 1989) were overwhelming, leading them to give up early or not start at all. For Andy and Nadia, and, in some subtle ways, Lina and Arthur, the sense of futility they felt and their implicit sense that they were not in control of their own lives led them to a state of confusion, that in, Bowers' terms, emerges as a burgeoning and debilitating sense of alienation. In general, all of the students displayed some form or degree of alienation (few students can sustain unabated enthusiasm and interest for every aspect of school), but for students like Andy and Nadia it was chronic, as it was not only derived from the situation, it was also exacerbated by it. In many ways, both explicit and implicit, I observed this iatrogenic feature of schooling emerging from and situated within the students' classroom experiences.

In support of my contention that a great deal of the low agency students' disabilities were derived from their experiences with learning in the classroom, it is interesting to note that every day Andy went home and, for four hours helped his parents in the grocery store they owned. In addition, he spoke Vietnamese fluently. Similarly, in the course of a conversation about the Provincial achievement tests, Nadia shared this insight with me:

JP: Did the practice [for the tests] help?
Nadia: Yah, and ahh … uhmm … [long pause] … by helping me see how the writing is and how to answer it, and uhmm … the language is hard and I can't think of anything more.
JP: So, it helped to do them. Did you do any studying for them?
Nadia: [Shakes her head]
JP: Didn't have time?
Nadia: No. I've been helping my grandma cause she's been in a car accident and I have to help her, and Yah, like that.
JP: How long ago was the accident
Nadia: I think last week on Monday or Tuesday. It was my cousins and they were in a car crash. She had a black eye and had to stay in hospital for two nights and my cousins, A and E, they both have a mark on their left side.

It is pertinent to this discussion to juxtapose Nadia's explanation of her encounter with the testing program upon her concluding comments about the car accident and to note the differences. Nadia was expected to help at home with her baby brother and her grandmother, and usually when she talked about her family, her experiences outside of school, or her interests, she was easy to follow, forceful and coherent. This conversational "fluency" was also evident when Lina talked about the Backstreet Boys and Arthur discussed soccer. It is also interesting that during our actual conversations, most often everything that they shared made sense to me in the context. I can only assume that my ability to follow their responses was derived in part from being with them for an extended period. In a sense, I surreptitiously assumed part of their discourse as my own. In retrospect, I realize that a great deal of my interpretation was dependent upon my assumption of their discourse. Thus, the transcripts of our conversations do not capture all of the nuanced meta-messages that accompanied our conversations, indicating that the students were not quite as disfluent as the bare transcripts imply. Despite this proviso, there was a clear difference between the two groups of students in their abilities to discuss their understandings of their learning experiences in school. The fact that the low agency students appeared confused and disoriented in the classroom and in their talk about their experiences is one indicator that school was apparently "not working" efficaciously for four of the eight students in the inquiry.

The Teacher's Role in the Inquiry

To this point, I have acknowledged the eight students who were my co-participants in the inquiry and it is incumbent upon me to acknowledge the role that Mr. T., the teacher played in facilitating the research. For two years Mr.T. allowed me to prod, pry, observe, write notes in his class, and talk at length with his students without ever being really sure exactly what I was doing. In my submission to the school district, I indicated that I would follow ethical procedures and I had the permission of the principal to generate data in the school. Mr. T. agreed to allow me into his classroom on the basis of somewhat sketchy information. All he knew was that I was "interested in how students thought about learning," but little else. My attempt to situate my interpretation in as "natural a setting as possible" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) meant that I could not intervene in the daily classroom routines, the students' learning, or the teacher's methods. It also meant that I could not discuss with Mr. T. his plans, his methods, or his rationale; nor did I provide any direct feedback to him while the study was proceeding as to how his students perceived their learning in his class (although we did develop an implicit code of "teacher looks" during the course of my time in his classroom). He was literally a "silent partner" in the inquiry and his role required a great deal of trust in my personal integrity and the ethical guidelines I had agreed to follow for the study. Nevertheless, as Biggs and Edwards (1994) point out,

> We [as researchers in classrooms] have been faced with the very real tension between trust and what might be perceived as betrayal. On the one hand, teachers have been generous enough to open up their classrooms and expose themselves to scrutiny. On the other hand, it is very likely that they might not be able to handle the observations … . (p. 97)

In an effort to be as open as possible with Mr.T., at the conclusion of the first phase of the inquiry, we did discuss some of my initial observations, and I shared with him the challenge that I had as a teacher observing another teacher's practice. As Newkirk (1996) points out "Anyone who spends a great deal of time in a teacher's classroom, particularly someone who has experience in a similar teaching situation will observe practices that seem ineffective" (p. 13). Boostrom (1994) identifies this as the "evaluator" stage of interpretive research, and I have discussed previously how I became aware of my propensity to engage in this during the familiarization stage of the inquiry. Eventually, my observations were tempered by the recognition that a colleague sitting in my classroom would probably see many of my shortcomings (and perhaps, wish to point them out to me as soon as possible). As Michelle Fine (1987) observes

> The researcher's sadistic pleasure of spotting another teacher's collapsed contradiction, aborted analysis, or silencing sentence was moderated only by the ever-present knowledge that similar analytic surgery could easily be performed on my own classes. (p. 172)

Overall, the reading of this interpretive account needs to be situated in my recognition that all teachers are caught in an ongoing dilemma. They are continually faced with situations wherein they are required to respond to conflicting demands within and without the school. In one sense, what emerged as the inquiry proceeded was how these often contradictory expectations and demands filter down to become a critical part of the interpretive frames that children use to explain what counts as learning in the classroom.

Summary

In this chapter, I have presented a number of insights into who each student in the study was. In developing a perspective on each I have concentrated mainly on those characteristics that contributed to the "personal agency" of each of the students as these characteristics appeared to be those that contributed most to their "success" in this particular classroom. I have noted that each of the eight students in the study, in his or her own unique way, demonstrated a form of resilience. However, for some of them, it was apparent that the coping and response skills they had developed were not adequate enough to allow them to respond to the classroom demands placed upon, or the demonstrations of learning expected from them, by the system of education in which they were immersed. From our conversations and my observations, it was clear that the interpretive frameworks that they had developed and the ways in which the classroom/school shaped and defined them had not equipped the "low agency" students to appropriately deal with "learning" as it was defined in the classroom. In fact, they, and in certain respects all of the students, had developed and were developing a form of Discourse that, from a number of perspectives could be viewed as non- or even counter-productive to their best interests, both in their own lives and in the roles that they needed to assume in their present and future communities.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE INTERPRETIVE ACCOUNT PART B: THE STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT WITH LEARNING

Hatch (1995) suggests that the "context" for studying children and their situations is formed from a composite of interrelated situational factors that include,

- the physical setting in which the social action occurs,
- a set of participants and their relationship to one another,
- and the activities in which participants are involved (p. 124)

In Chapter 5, I described the "physical setting" for the inquiry, and I indicated that the school devoted considerable attention and time to the development of the students' citizenship skills and attitudes. Chapter 6 was devoted to a description and interpretation of the students as co-participants in the inquiry. In many ways, this analysis presented the students as caring and considerate individuals who generally behaved responsibly within the parameters established by the school. I detailed how some of the students displayed high personal agency and some low, and I discussed the somewhat debilitating effects of confusion, frustration and alienation as they were apparent in the low agency students' talk and actions. In general, all of the students in the class were enthusiastic and reliable when it came to helping out with school and class activities. They appeared to like opportunities to be in charge and I saw little evidence of any bullying in the form that they believed they themselves had been subject to the previous year. In this chapter, I present a selective sampling of the students' classroom learning activities. Although it is not comprehensive, it is intended to provide a general sense of how each student's interpretive framework contributed to his or her understanding of how the classroom activities were supposed to proceed, the purpose(s) for the activities, and the roles they were supposed to assume.

Learning Through Interaction

> One very powerful way students come to change or reinforce conceptions is through social discourse. Having an opportunity to present one's own ideas, as well as being permitted to hear and reflect on the ideas of others, is an empowering experience. The benefit of discourse with others, particularly with peers, facilitates the meaning-making process (Brooks & Brooks, 1993, p. 108).

During the time I observed in the classroom, the majority of student activities in all subject areas were completed within groups. Usually their teacher had them work in groups of four facing each other in a square. Occasionally they worked with a partner and, for a short period, they were placed in rows. Sometimes for science activities they were allowed to form their own groupings. In these self-formed groupings, they usually chose their friends, and boys and girls did work together. However, the low agency students, except for Arthur, were seldom "chosen", and most often they simply attached themselves to a group. Sometimes it was apparent that Mr. T. rearranged the groups because of the students' disruptive behavior, and, on these occasions, he made it clear that the students were being reprimanded, and they had to stay in rows until their "behavior improved." Seen from this perspective, grouping was presented to the students as a privilege or reward for good behavior, and not as essential to their learning. I will indicate later just how such messages affected the low agency students' perceptions of how they were supposed to work in their groups. Because of the relatively small size of the class (17 students), the teacher appeared to be able to monitor the interaction patterns within the groups, and the groups were changed or adjusted regularly based on this monitoring. In his apparent efforts to create the most productive interactive grouping within the class, Mr. T. was constantly trying new grouping arrangements and alignments. For many students, the regular rearranging of the groups served to create confusion related to how and why the groupings were constituted as they were. The following excerpt from a group discussion indicates the range of interpretations the students attached to their classroom groupings.

JP: How about the groups changing?

Gerri: I like moving around and I don't want to be a partner and I hate them right? And some I like and understand … now, I used to hate a lot of people and now that I work with them I know them better and I can understand why they do this.

Nadia: Being with persons I like is easier for me to think more than how much I hate them and bother me so I like working with my friends.

JP: How does Mr.T. decide?

Keith: Sees how people worked with each other--randomly---make you work with anyone and *learn to get with it or live it!*

JP: So I thought … it doesn't matter who you work with or who you get on with?

Andy: Yah, so we get in trouble so we say it quietly to self … like one person, … so … know how to operate 'cause … but helps to work with all others … so some people don't work are now working and people don't now hate them … .

JP: Like individual work?

Arthur: Like it … so, no one will copy my work and get into an argument and stuff … .

Nadia: Well, … I like to work by myself so … and I get help in groups.

JP: Rattrap? [Jonathon's chosen pseudonym when we were in groups]

Jonathon: Some kids are lazy and not working…

JP: Do those kids need more help?

Marion: *No, some kids are just lazy and we have a loophole in system* so if someone else does all the work they get same mark and sometimes Mr.T. doesn't see it. They stop when Mr.T. looks.

JP: How can you solve some of the problems?

Keith: Some kids copy me now, but in Junior High, it won't do you any good.

Marion: Bothers me, but doesn't do any good.

Jonathon: Train you for Junior High, but he'll fail Junior High and in rows teacher will see you and you'll be in rows and on your own. Junior High more strict … this class less strict … Junior High teacher tell you what to do!

JP: Nadia?

Nadia: I think it's like strict and you have to do own work and I don't know … I have things on my mind and I don't kind of think of Junior High *and whatever happens. I DON'T CARE! It just happens.*

Several themes emerge in this interchange of ideas. In the first place, it appears that the students did not see groups, particularly when they were constituted solely by their teacher, primarily as a means for constructing personal meanings. Neither did they particularly like being in groups. Gerri indicated in a number of ways that most often she preferred to do her own activities. Keith and Andy appeared to feel that their teacher wanted them to develop their social skills, to learn to get along (whether they wanted to or not. They had to "like it or live it" (as Keith pointed out in his rather apt mixed metaphor). The other students in this group felt that, in many ways, the groupings imposed by their teacher were personally not fair as they often encouraged copying and students getting credit for the someone else's efforts. This point of view was particularly pervasive among the "high agency" students, Jonathon, Marion, and Keith. It is interesting that Arthur put himself in the "copied from" group, as generally he relied heavily on the support of his peers in almost every situation. Overall, the high agency students felt that many of their peers were inappropriately dependent and they felt that eventually this dependency would result in problems for the low agency students.

In many ways, the movement toward classrooms organized around cooperative learning groupings (Jarolimek & Foster, 1997; Johnson & Johnson, 1991; Lemlech, 1998) represents a constructivist response to the " transmission" notion that learning is essentially an individual enterprise. What emerged from my discussions with the students was a picture that suggests that in all of the activities the students did interact in various ways; however, it was apparent that these interactions did not produce the anticipated results for the students. Thus, in a theoretical sense, while groups focus on and support both social and individual learning, the views on grouping expressed by these students relate to personal feelings, such as "hating" other students, laziness, copying, isolation, and sometimes a high level of discomfort. It was interesting to me that most of their personal indignation or inner turmoil was not apparent in their responses to the changing of the groups. Most often, they appeared to accept without rancor their reassignment to another group, and they seldom showed any overt displeasure. Their disclosure of their personal animosities during our discussions came as a surprise to me. It was only as I observed closely, that I realized that they were engaged in a subtle form of passive resistance that had arisen in a spontaneous manner. It was a form of opposition that allowed them to retain a certain modicum of control in response to a curriculum that was heavily dependent upon competition as an external motivator.

They also expressed a strong sense of arbitrariness and little sense of why they were grouped and, of equal importance, how they were supposed to interact in the group in ways that would support each other's learning. They accepted the fact that, *fait accompli*, some students in the groups did all of the work, but, although they allowed it, they anticipated that those who "copied" would eventually suffer severe consequences in ensuing grades.

It was also apparent that the high agency students sometimes inadvertently promoted the "learned helplessness" of the other students in their group, and a major contributing factor was their perception of what their teacher valued and acknowledged as learning. Based on his experiences with his class, Mr. T. found it necessary to constantly remind them of the need for group cohesion, working together, contributing, and generally "getting along", but he always stressed the primary need for each student to be accountable for personal productivity outcomes. In effect, he indicated the need for them to put forth a conscious effort to make the group work, while he expected them to stay on task and provide evidence that they had worked individually. As a result, he sometimes presented conflicting instructions for the class. His intention was to have them use the groups to discuss and share ideas and then to use the discussion as the basis for their own work. It was apparent that this conception was overly complex for the class, and the low agency students had problems figuring out how they were supposed to act in their groups, particularly as they most often relied on the other students to interpret procedures and outcomes for them. This conversational extract with Andy is illustrative of the kind of confusion they experienced.

JP:	Who's in your group?
Andy:	JD and Arthur … it work kind of good.
JP:	When you discussed the letter this morning did you share ideas?
Andy:	*NOO…* … !
JP:	So … you were pretty well on your own?
Andy:	Uhmmm yeah!
JP:	How could you make the group work better?
Andy:	Don't bug them, just sit there, just help them too. *NO* talking or something.
JP:	By doing … some talking?
Andy:	*No ....noo* … only in helping can talk. … Oh, I don't know!

In this exchange Andy appears to be struggling with the distinction between talking as "fooling around" and talking as necessary to get his assignment done, and it was apparent from my observations that he was never sure of exactly how they were different. As a result, he seldom said anything or contributed overtly to his group's activities. Despite his claim that he asked the teacher for help or guidance when he wasn't sure what to do, during the time I observed him in the classroom, he never did. It seemed that he didn't know how to ask without presenting himself as "fooling around" or "not listening," and both of these themes directed most of his responses to class. For the low agency students their uncertainty related to the purpose for and procedures involved in completing an activity led them to rely almost exclusively on their group partners for information and guidance. Sometimes the "help" they received served to create more confusion for them, and eventually they usually ended up as passive spectators of their partners' learning.

Brooks and Brooks (1993), in arguing the need for more constructivist practices in the classroom, present one of the foundational premises of constructivism: "Having an opportunity to present one's own ideas, as well as being permitted to hear and reflect on the ideas of others, is an empowering experience" (p. 108). Unfortunately, although the theory appears sound, for the low agency students this premise did not hold true. Hypothetically, they appeared to have opportunity to interact through dialogic encounters with each other, but the high agency students realized that their primary tasks during the group activities were to demonstrate to their teacher that they were actively engaged with their group while they pursued what they saw as the most efficient route to completing their personal assignments. As Mr. T. preferred to have the students decide their roles within the group, he usually assigned overall group tasks without specifying roles or particular cooperative learning strategies. Such a procedure, although it may encourage personal and group decision-making sometimes leads to unequal distribution of responsibility within the group (Slavin, 1991). Inevitably, Marion and the other high agency students assumed the management role in the groups. In assigning the roles within their groups, their primary emphasis was not on sharing learning or dialogic interaction within the group, but on productivity and completing the assignment as efficiently and as quickly as possible. As Marion explained,

> Groups of four better than groups of twos and ones 'cause there's a lot of things to do and in groups of four one person can do one and another can do another *and all do different things* and after we can put them all on a chart or anything Mr. T. wants.

Thus, in the division of labor within the groups, each of the students was assigned a task that would eventually be brought together by the high agency group leader, a practice that did not provide the low agency students with opportunities to develop key learning skills. As we continued with this particular discussion, Marion identified another critical problem that the classroom grouping procedures created for the low agency students.

> JP: What about the time everyone sat in rows individually; did that help with anything?
>
> Marion No! [Laughs] It's hard to do everything by yourself like get all the info in three days; so if there's four or two … uhmm … people can do different things and bring it together, and some people will work on books or computers and after that there is a whole paragraph or stuff, the things that we learned and the things we have to do.

What she did not mention, probably because it was not apparent to her and the other students, was the fact that when the high agency students assigned tasks within their groups, they usually did so on the basis of perceived competency. Because they were best at literacy related tasks, they tended to assume responsibility for any major reading or writing aspects of a project, and they usually took the responsibility for summarizing information and writing up descriptions and conclusions. The low agency students were assigned, and happily accepted, tasks such as drawing diagrams, tracing pictures, and making titles. The high agency students also assumed major responsibility in group assignments for conducting Internet searches and downloading information, and while the other students did do some searching themselves, it was inevitably the high agency students who decided that their particular findings were the ones to be included.

As one direct result, the high agency students developed and honed the academic literacy skills that they required to succeed in most school-related tasks. Of equal importance, they also developed social management/leadership skills such as organizing, directing, delegating, and decision-making, which in turn served to increase their self-confidence and personal efficacy. The low agency students, although they did make a contribution to the project or assignment, did not appear to be developing or applying the literacy skills they needed to be successful in school. In addition, although they professed to ask their teacher for help when they needed it, they seldom did when I was present; they relied almost entirely on their fellow group members to interpret the task for them, assign them a role, and generally direct and control the way they needed to respond. On occasions when this help was not forthcoming, they appeared lost and seldom could complete their assignments.

It was obvious at times that the need of the high agency students to produce evidence of their learning for their teacher usually took precedence over helping the other students in their groups, and this was particularly so when they were "partnered up" for activities. Thus, when they perceived it to be fortuitous, the high agency students simply left the other students to their own devices. As Gerri observed

JP: Mr. T. has been changing the groups around. What's your thinking on this?
Gerri: I think its good 'cause sometimes if you work with a partner, like, too long, you'll, like, get tired of them, and sometimes if you're with a partner who always copies off you or something then it's a change every week.
JP: So, you think its good to change the groups?
Gerri: Yeah!
JP: People didn't mind who they worked with, but that wasn't right with you was it? Why do you feel that way?
Gerri: Like, some people, like, … uhmm … when work together they, like, talk and they're not right for each other 'cause they, like, talk and talk and get in trouble … like that!
JP: So some groups don't work 'cause they're not on task. Do you find that quite distracting?
Gerri Yeah, 'cause then I can't concentrate.
JP: You seem to have the ability to just get on with the assignment.
Gerri: Yeah, like, the people in my group, *they usually don't talk a lot but if they do, I just ignore them, like!*

For Nadia and Andy "being ignored" was a part of classroom life to which they appeared almost resigned, but in many ways, some of their other experiences with group work bordered on the traumatic. When I asked Nadia to talk about her group experiences, she generally evinced an abiding sense of frustration. She appeared to be at a stage where her frustration and confusion was such that "whatever happens … I don't care! It just happens." It is difficult to capture the extent of the futility that she shared in such comments. From my perspective, her life in the classroom "just happened"; she had no apparent control and there was little in her immediate experiential world to indicate that change was forthcoming. I have noted previously how she attempted to rationalize her sense of isolation during the "Greece" project. Her insecurity was heightened by the way her teacher constantly reorganized the groups, without being aware apparently of the social undercurrents that flowed in the classroom.

JP: In our group we talked about working with others. What kind of group do you like to be in?
Nadia: Like, you're not the only girl in the group; like, you have at least one girl with you, and you know those people and you like them 'cause if

you don't like 'em you start fighting and you won't get anything done so!

JP: So, you need to have another girl in the group

Nadia: Yeah we don't like being the only girl in the group like it's hard being the only girl.

JP: Now you said that "we" don't like it [the way the groups were formed by the teacher]. Is it "you" or the girls in general that don't like it?

Nadia: The girls don't like it either—we're always talking—yesterday at recess and we all found out that we didn't like being by ourselves in the group 'cause there you go … three boys all in your group and you're the only girl it's like hard 'cause when you try to talk to them they just ignore you but if a girls in your group I try to ask them questions and like answer them for you so...

JP: Would an all girl group work?

Nadia: Yeah!

Unfortunately, her belief that girls always helped and supported girls, even though it provided her with some comfort was illusionary, as this observation/reflection from my field notes indicates.

> May, 1999
>
> Their assignment in language arts today was to read a story with a partner and summarize it by section as they read. It was soon apparent that some of the students were unsure of how to proceed. Mr. T. had indicated that they could "talk and discuss with each other," but he stressed that they needed to complete the assignment "individually". Some of the partnerships tried to follow the process, but most of the high and "middle" agency students chose to individually complete the assignment. Nadia's partner, Marion, began to work on her own and did not discuss the assignment or read with her. Nadia tried to give the appearance that she and Marion were working together, but it soon became apparent that she was on her own. Left to her own devices, she appeared to rapidly lose interest and, in the end did not engage with the assigned activity in any way during the 50-minute period. On several occasions, Marion checked with Mr. T., but she did not share any of the information with Nadia. Mr. T. did not appear to be aware of Nadia's dilemma and she appeared "reluctant" to bring it to his attention; so she remained quiescent, a pattern of behaviour that was repeated on a daily basis.

It was somewhat ironic that when I subsequently asked her who she preferred to work with, Nadia replied, "I like Marion." When I asked her "Why?", she replied, "Well, because she listens to me and she understands what I am saying … so … and we two are, like, best friends … like … for the whole year." But as Marion pointed out in our group discussion, "… some kids are just lazy and … we have a loophole in system so if someone else does all the work they get same mark and sometimes Mr.T. doesn't see it; they stop when Mr.T. looks." When it came to sharing ideas in groups, it was apparent that this sense of umbrage took precedence over any empathetic concern the high agency students might have for the plight of the low agency students. Additionally, often in the interests of their personal productivity, the high agency students would let the other students "copy", rather than spend time discussing ideas or taking into account alternative perspectives. Thus, they contributed to the already diminished sense of competency and personal agency of the other students. Ultimately, the combination of benign tolerance that the high agency students practiced (premised, perhaps, on the belief that the low agency students would eventually pay the piper), and the need for the students to be individually accountable to their teacher, created a situation in which the low agency students saw simply surviving as being a worthwhile learning outcome. As Andy observed, "You should work with everyone and … even one ignore you. Not with your friends … someone who is kind to you."

There are, of course, some key differences between cooperative learning and simply learning in groups. Borman and Levine (1997) point out that in group situations students often work on their own with no sense of a group effort or product while in cooperative learning, all of the students are likely to be responsible for the final outcome. Similarly, often in group work situations, some students engage in hitchhiking, wherein they let other students do all the work; whereas in cooperative activities, each student has a clearly defined role or assignment which contributes to the overall success of the group project. Finally, the role of the teacher in cooperative learning contexts is to actively promote the interaction "skills" and competencies that each student needs to effectively learn in these situations. It was obvious in Mr. T.'s classroom that the group activities fell somewhere in between cooperative learning and learning in groups. Certainly specific roles and responsibilities were developed within the groups, but, as I have described, when the students were left to decide them, quite often the practice did not benefit the low agency students.

Grouping students for learning is almost the *sine qua non* of constructivist classrooms (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). Without interactive, cooperative exchanges, the construction of meaning appears to be learning without reference, the transmission of uncontested information as truth. Discussion and the free exchange of ideas leading to, and resulting in, dialectical consensus building underlie the practice of grouping students (Borman & Levine, 1997; Jarolimek & Foster, 1997; Johnson & Johnson, 1991; Lemlech, 1998). However, as Borman and Levine (1997) suggest, in order to be "effective", group learning situations must be constituted according to some rather specific guidelines. They suggest that cooperative learning activities that are well-conceived and carried out contribute positively to student learning. It was apparent that, although the student groupings in Mr. T.'s classroom were constituted according to what their teacher felt were appropriate guidelines, the students did not interpret them in the same spirit.

Learning by Listening and Attending

A key theme that emerged, both from my observations and my conversations with the students related to the misconceptions about classroom procedures that some of them had developed. From their teacher's perspective, the students often appeared to be not attending in class. In response to this observation, Mr. T. would remind them periodically and forcefully that they had to improve their poor listening skills. His experiences with them indicated, in the first place, that quite often the students simply did not pick up the information that he wanted them to, and, in the second place, they seldom appeared to remember what had been presented and practiced previously. This led him to assume that the students needed more in depth explanations and constant review of previously covered concepts before they commenced the majority of their learning activities. Although it seemed that, for this group of students, it was important for the teacher to activate prior knowledge or previous learning before he could proceed with new learning, close observation revealed that the review process created "attending" problems for the high agency students and induced compensatory responses that were somewhat counter-productive for the low agency students. Overtly, these responses were most often apparent in the way that the students "turned off" or "tuned out" a very short time after their teacher began the introduction/review of the lesson. One example I recorded in my early observations in the class is illustrative.

> May, 1998
>
> Today during a math lesson Mr. T. introduced the concept of the bar graph and demonstrated it on the board. He used some examples from data the students had collected previously about their TV viewing habits. Melanie [one of the students who started in the study with me, but was away for a considerable time] started out by looking toward the front of the room in the general direction of the teacher, but soon disengaged and began to stare steadfastly at her desk. She remained in this position for most of the introduction and review of previously presented concepts for the entire 20 minutes that elapsed. Toward the end of the introduction/explanation, she dropped her head onto her arm and appeared to doze off. I had a distinct impression that she in some way "turned off" immediately upon hearing the word *math*, but I could not be sure. Mr. T. indicated that it was time for them to begin working with their partners developing their own graphs. Melanie sprang into action, took out her math book, ruler, and pencil and proceeded to actively engage with her partner in some form of activity. I was somewhat mystified as she appeared not to have taken in one minute of the introduction. Later, during a conversation with her, she shared with me the fact that she found math very confusing. When I asked her what her teacher could do to help, she told me that she needed more explanation of how to do "it".

One result of teachers' inclinations or tendencies to dominate the talk in their classrooms may be a certain "turning off" on the part of the students. This appeared to be the case in Mr. T.'s classroom. When I asked the students about this apparent "turning off", they gave me a number of reasons, and somewhat surprisingly most of them attributed it to themselves. Jonathon said, "Some kids probably don't sleep right … so … they go to bed at 11 and don't get a lot of sleep." Nadia told me, "That happens to me all the time. We stay up late and … uhm … we wake up early in the morning."

Lina presented a more "balanced" perspective, "Probably they don't understand what Mr. T. is saying … and are really tired and maybe day before they went to sleep late and watch TV or watch Pokemon around twelve o'clock or one they go sleep … they tired out!" Andy believed that the mental effort involved in learning was the reason he ran out of gas sometimes; "Maybe they [the tired students] think so hard, they get tired. They try to pass and they get tired." When I replied, "Do you get tired?", he responded, "Your brain keeps concentrating."

Arthur was much more direct: "What do you mean … when kids get tired, it gets boring. Like, learning the same thing over and over again … Wouldn't you get bored? Huh, *WELL! WOULDN'T YOU*!" In a similar vein, Keith shared insights that provided a sense of how too much teacher talk created problems for both the high and the low agency students.

> Keith: Sometimes Mr. T. draws pictures too much and most of the kids say "Oh, no! Mr. T. is drawing pictures again, and we wait and he explains it and we still don't get it because every time he draws a picture we don't … like … understand, cause teachers aren't … like … so clear.
>
> JP: Mr. T. says it's important to listen. Is that the answer, to listen more closely?
>
> Keith: Sometimes, sometimes not. Even if you listen more closely and you still don't understand, then there's no point in listening more closely. That's why some people don't listen because they don't understand. *If they understand then they will listen* or they keep on asking the teacher until he tells them to stop and do it on their own or get the partner to do all the work.

The point that Keith makes about the relationship between understanding and attending has a distinct Vygotskian ring to it. It was apparent that a great deal of the low agency students' lack of listening was attributable to the gap between their current understanding and the concepts that the teacher was presenting. In addition, Keith points out how the classroom learning system worked against the low agency students developing their attending skills; they needed to "do it on their own or get the partner to do all the work." The low agency students implicitly recognized that in almost all cases they did not have to listen closely, in a sense, "remember" the information that their teacher provided for them. In the first place, they recognized that, before each lesson, their teacher would inevitably review any previous "learning" for them and, if they were fortunate, he would not call upon them to be part of the recall. In fact, during the time I observed in the classroom, the low agency students were seldom called upon to answer review questions as it appeared Mr. T. knew that they inevitably would not or could not respond. The students also were aware that the "penalty" for not remembering was a reprimand that informed them that they "had to improve their listening skills," to which they responded by looking sheepish and apologetic. The low agency students had internalized this message in some way, with the result that they attributed their personal failure to learn with "poor listening skills," as these student comments indicate:

Nadia:

JP: What happens when you don't understand?
Nadia: Sometimes I'm not listening.

Lina:

JP: Mr. T. emphasized how important it is to listen; why is it important?
Lina: Probably, like, if you don't listen and someone asks you a question, you don't know what, or like, or get shy or everything.
JP: Do you get put on the spot?
Lina: Yeah, a little. One time I listen in class, so I don't get shy.

Andy:

JP: How about the activities; are they difficult to do?
Andy: Kind of hard and easy.
JP: Why hard?
Andy: I never listen a lot.

Andy again:

JP: If you were going to help teachers read [to the class] better what advice would you give them?
Andy What?
JP: [Repeats question]
Andy: Tell 'em to read the part again if I didn't listen.

Despite the fact that they professed an urgent need to improve their "listening skills", they tended not to, and one reason was that, they implicitly "knew" that someone in their group or their partner would probably attend to the assignment directions for them. Another reason they did not bother was because their interpretations were always the first to be discounted or dismissed by their group; so, most often Nadia, Andy, and Lina relied on the group system being in place in the classroom. However, as I have pointed out previously, if the high agency students were too busy or concerned with their own production to share or help, the low agency students were left to figure out how a procedure worked and a variety of misconceptions resulted. Sometimes when the low agency students were forced to rely on themselves for interpretation and guidance, even more complex misunderstandings emerged. This can be seen in the way that they described an activity that required them to individually "make up thinking questions."

Learning as Remembering

Mr. T. had attended a workshop on multiple intelligences and how this notion could be applied in the classroom. Although I did not discuss any of the specifics of this with him, he had obviously spent considerable time explaining to the students and working with examples of how they could promote different ways and levels of thinking. As part of the program, he spent time encouraging them to develop "thinking" questions. As I was not in class for the explanation, and thus, did not really know what was meant by "thinking questions," I discussed the concept with them after they had spent two periods individually making up thinking questions related to a Science unit on "Flight". What follows are some of their responses to "What is a thinking question?"

> Arthur: What question you think would be on the test and then you make up the question, like, one was the principles of air to make it fly and I wrote that down.

Gerri: Using what or how rather than yes or no question … what would happen if right ailerons up and left down then it would bank to the right.

Jonathon: Like what is the thingy on the back of the plane? That's not a thinking one. It's not too easy … you have to think a lot about it.

Keith: Using more than one idea in a question. For example, like, what happened when the left aileron goes up and right goes down and the elevators are up. That's higher thinking questions than asking what happens when left aileron is up and right is down

Lina: The one that really, really hard, one really hard one, like, name all the pieces in the flight or what do the elevator do and where is the elevator and stuff?
JP: So they are thinking questions. What's a non-thinking question?
Lina: Uh … like, uhmm ... what is an airplane? ... Hahhh!

Nadia: Makes a person think a little
JP: So, what's a non-thinking question?
Nadia: (no response)
JP: Easy?
Nadia: Yeah!

As I observed the "making up thinking questions" activity, most of the students, even though they looked busy, produced very few questions, and some produced none. Their apparent confusion about "thinking questions" may be attributed to the fact that the concept was too abstract for them to grasp, or that their teacher had failed to provide them with enough opportunity to "learn" what these questions were. Lina's interpretation of the "thinking questions" activity is illustrative of the problem that they had with the activity:

> It was ok. It was useful a little bit. I'm really, like, a good writer in tests. I'm not really good in making up question. Like, sometime I make up a question really, really easy and then Mr. T. say, "be a little bit more challenging." Right! And I try to think and I couldn't but I'm not really good at writing questions … Hah!

Another reading of the situation may be that Mr. T., by providing them with a practical opportunity to reflect upon their learning in the unit, was providing them with an opportunity to work through and demonstrate their understandings of this concept. However, their responses do serve to illustrate the diverse ways that each of the students interpreted the activity. For some of the students, the explanation of thinking questions may be considered reasonably accurate, but for most, their understanding appeared to be minimal. This was particularly true for the low agency students who had developed such dependencies that when they were left to their own devices, they seldom successfully completed any activities that called for independent application.

I include the students' comments and responses not to question whether teachers should assign their students to "make up thinking questions," but as a general illustration of what may be considered a critical element of learning, the ability to remember what has been previously "learned". In many ways, the students' misinterpretations appear to have resulted from a combination of factors. In the first place, the degree to which they remembered what they were required to learn, be it content or skills, depended to a great deal on whether or not it made sense to them. Secondly, the habits of mind that the students had developed did not appear to include active remembering. In addition, without being aware of it, Mr. T. set up a situation wherein the students essentially did not have to bother remembering most of what occurred in the classroom. His pre-lesson review and explanation of previously presented concepts coupled with the group process conspired to allow students to "get by" without having to engage in remembering as one element of active learning.

Most texts devoted to learning theory stress the idea of "authentic assessment" of student learning, and they place particular emphasis on the fact that learning is a *process* of engagement. Seldom do these texts allude to any form of remembering or to the development of memory as an important facet of learning. My somewhat cursory review of selected language arts and curriculum texts revealed that memory, remembering, or retention of ideas are not categories that are listed in their indexes, nor do these aspects of learning appear with any frequency in scholarly discussion relating to the construction of meaning. The ability to recall information is generally associated with a bygone, somewhat regrettable mechanistic learning paradigm. Terms such as "rote memorization" and "regurgitation" present a somewhat pejorative notion of remembering associated with "traditional learning paradigms." Thus, in constructivist classrooms, teachers encourage students to engage in a learning activity, record and share their responses, highlight significant aspects of their learning and generally demonstrate to the teacher the degree to which they have been personally engaged in the "process". Sometimes, students reflect upon their personal growth and give an accounting of what it consists in. Although this emphasis on process and response is necessary to the personal construction of meaning, for the students in this inquiry, a great deal of their "learning" required a highly complex ability to recall information. It appeared, however, that the students regarded recall and remembering as separate from learning, something that was done later for tests and exams. Thus, they often shared with me how they had "studied" for a test without ever realizing that learning required them to actively remember the more pertinent aspects of what they had experienced. In the case of the "thinking" questions, there is no doubt that their teacher had defined and gone over what was required, but it was apparent that they could not remember what the criteria were. The result was that they were unable to fulfill the assignment according to the desired specifications.

Healy (1990) in her discussion of how children learn, points out "good readers learn to remember" and further "Memory also demands mental perseverance, for it depends on maintaining information in what is called 'working memory' long enough to 'store' in some sort of meaningful form, and 'retrieve' it when needed. Passive brains retain sensations, not information" (p. 231). She further points out that "Children who do not understand what they are seeing do not learn active memory strategies" (p. 231), which reflects Jonathon's observation, "Kids who don't understand, don't listen. They will only listen if they understand!" As I have discussed previously, the students' learning was strongly affected by its personal relevance. So, it may be that, in some way the discussion of "thinking questions" did not connect with the students. Perkins suggests that this "shortfall" may rest upon a curriculum that offers opportunities for students to acquire only "*fragile knowledge*, which means that students do not remember, understand, or use actively much of what they have supposedly learned; and *poor thinking*, which means that students do not think very well with what they know" (1992, p. 20, *original emphasis*). However, given that the teacher had obviously spent considerable time "teaching" the students the difference between "thinking" and other types of questions, it should be expected that they would use this information to complete the assignment. McAfee and Leong (1997) in their discussion of the need for learners to develop memory strategies point out that "Teachers often expect children to remember things (what they have learned yesterday, what they are supposed to bring from home, what they are supposed to tell their parents), but seldom teach memory strategies" (1997, p. 160). Pat Payne (Bainbridge & Malicky, 2000) in her discussion of drama in the elementary school suggests the use of "memory boxes" which facilitate students' recall of specific story features or elements), as an important foundational step to further learning experiences for children. Borman and Levine (1998) provide a comprehensive summary of memorization techniques which include rehearsal, rhymes, association, mnemonics and self-testing. Johnson et al. (1984) suggest that students who are expected to learn in cooperative settings need to develop a set of skills necessary for "formulating", to build "deeper understandings of the materials being studied, and to ensure mastery and retention of the assigned material" (p. 47). The majority of the skills they suggest are devoted to helping students to retain in some manner the material and ideas that they have encountered in their learning groups. However, for most of the students in the study, the only strategy they had available was "listening" more closely to their teacher, and they were usually uncertain what such listening entailed.

The foregoing brief review suggests that students can develop specific strategies for remembering. It also suggests that when students cannot make connections with what they are required to learn, when the information and skills presented do not make sense to them, their inability to remember may simply be a symptom of the larger disconnection students experience in classrooms.

Learning as Procedures and Routines

From the previous discussion, it is apparent that some of the students were uncertain about how they were supposed to operate within the group learning context. From my observations, it became apparent that certain other classroom procedures or learning routines, even those that appeared straightforward, were sometimes misconstrued by students. Their interpretations of how they were supposed to learn to spell is illustrative. The instructional strategy used by the teacher was to have each student focus on learning to spell words that caused personal problems, rather than memorizing a standardized list of words each week, a practice that reflects an emerging perspective which indicates that a "spelling series" approach to instruction is essentially unproductive. Bainbridge and Malicky, 2000, note, "One of the chief findings of this body of research … is that teaching words through a spelling program in a textbook is generally ineffective" (p. 249). In addition, the "individual approach" fits in with the constructivist notion that learners need to assume responsibility for their own learning and for charting their own progress. However, even though their teacher did monitor and supervise their activities during this period, some of the students had clearly misinterpreted what they were supposed to be doing and, in addition, they also did not appear to recognize the purpose for the particular sequence of activities that was labeled learning to spell. In a relative sense, some of the students could be considered adequate spellers, but for Andy, Nadia and Lina this was not the case; and this was particularly true of Arthur who had major reading and writing problems, all of which he attributed to his inability to spell. Lina saw the inability to spell "the main words" as a "huge problem" as this exchange illustrates:

JP: Is spelling important?

Lina: Yeh ... like, whenever you are writing a test, like a writing test for example, you write, like, something … something and you don't know how to spell it, it's, like, a *huge problem*, like, if you don't know how to spell, like, hard words is OK, but the main word like, 'the, cat, when, what, where' like, the main word you can't spell it you have, like, a *huge problem*. I guess 'cause those are the words I got to spell. … I can spell all the main words like "the cat etc." but if you don't know "population" like, that's OK. You don't use Shakespeare every single day, like, I don't like Shakespeare, for example, but we always use the word 'said, the, when.'

Although Lina's explanation contains a certain hyperbole, for many of the students in the study, particularly Arthur, being able to spell correctly or even adequately was commensurate with effective writing. Some felt that the way they could do better on the yearly Provincial Achievement writing tests was to improve their spelling. Although it was apparent that their teacher did not tell them this directly, like the Grade 3 students in Boostrom's 1991 study who spontaneously developed a set of "class rules" apart from anything their teacher had told them, the students had independently come to this conclusion about the importance of spelling. Procedurally, Mr. T. set aside time three mornings each week for them to develop and practice individual spelling strategies based on words that caused them personal problems. Sometimes Mr. T. would teach them common spelling generalizations, but most of the time they developed and studied their own word lists. As I was not entirely sure how the system worked, I asked the students to explain it to me. Some of their explanations follow:

Arthur: You pick 11 words and study and when the day comes your partner gives you them and you see how many you get right. Monday you pick the words and on Wednesday, you get the test and on Friday you get the final test.

JP: Do you always remember them?

Arthur: Yes!

JP: Does Mr. T. record the marks?

Arthur: Yes.

Keith: We have a spelling book, like, and we have to pick out 11 words and use the words in sentences so we know what they mean and stuff, and we take 11 and study them, but I don't study them 'cause I never have time and I don't know when the spelling test is. Sometimes it's Monday or Tuesday or Wednesday. I always seem to get 100% 'cause I choose the words that I can spell and not the harder ones I can't!

JP: Are the marks recorded?
Keith: Yah!

Gerri: Give us a lesson. We read books and choose 11 words and on Wednesday we do pretest and exchange and give each other the test and on Friday we do the posttest and that's it. We mark them ourself (sic) … I usually get 11 out of 11.

JP: OK, spelling time … how often do you practice spelling?
Nadia: I don't know … uhmm.
JP: Three times a week?
Nadia: No, two times a week.
JP: How does spelling practice work?
Nadia: Write down words from the week and partner gives uhmmm … his, and you read them to each other and a person that's reading to the person trying to spell it.
JP: If you get words wrong what do you do?
Nadia: Uhmmm … you put them down for next week.
JP: How do you do … are you a good speller?
Nadia: Kind of.
JP: Does Mr. T. record your mark?
Nadia: I don't know.

JP: So you give your partner 11 words in the morning … do you practice those words each time?
Lina: Well, we put the main one up and we study it and probably the next day or the day after the test—the post test—and then we study like the first test. If some of it wrong, we have to study a little bit harder, and then by the end of the week test we got it all right we get a good mark but if we get some of wrong we do it again until we got it right.
JP: Do most people study the words they didn't get?
Lina: Yeh, I think so.
JP: Does Mr. T. record the test?
Lina: Sometimes he do and sometimes he don't.

It is evident that each of the students not only viewed the spelling lesson from a different perspective, the "value" and importance they attached to the procedure varied considerably. While Arthur seems to have a reasonable grasp of the procedure and purpose, Nadia is not at all sure of how it works, and Gerri and Keith appear to have learned how to make the system work to their advantage. When I observed the spelling activity in the classroom, they all appeared to be actively engaged and interacting with each other. In other words, although they gave every appearance of being on task, whether or not they improved their spelling abilities is questionable given the ways in which each of them interpreted the activity and its intended outcome.

Essentially, the teacher's approach to instruction is supported in a number of ways by current theory, but its effectiveness was minimized because of the way that the students interpreted how the program was supposed to work. Although some of them had devised ways to make the system work for them, it was apparent that the goal of the procedure was not clear enough (or considered important enough) for most of them. In addition, the pre- and post-test situation did not appear to provide them with an adequate reason for attaching importance to what they were doing in the name of learning to spell. For some of them, their responsibility to remember the spellings of words was not apparent and, in the main, they regarded the spelling activity as a procedure to be followed rather than a skill (or set of skills and strategies) to be mastered.

It was also apparent that, for these students, the clearer and briefer the teacher's instructions, the more readily they got going with an activity, and the more likely they would be to become actively engaged. This was illustrated for me when the teacher invited the math consultant to come to his class and provide a lesson on probability as the students did not seem to be able to grasp the concept.

She began by providing a brief overview of her behavioral expectations, and within the first five minutes, introduced the lesson, distributed some materials and had the students actively engaged with a partner in solving a problem. All of the students responded positively to their experience with the math consultant and they could clearly identify the difference between it and their "regular lessons." However, my personal experience indicates that any break in routine, particularly when it occurs late in the school year, is usually greeted with enthusiasm by elementary students, and there certainly was a Hawthorne effect apparent on this occasion. It was also evident that this "change of pace" was one of the reasons why the teacher had invited the consultant in the first place. Coincidentally, from my perspective as an interpretive researcher, it did provide another view of how these students experienced school and I paid particular attention to the differences in the way the students reacted in this somewhat novel situation. When I asked them about the differences, if any, between the consultant's lesson and their "regular" math lesson, they responded as follows:

Arthur felt that "We did the dice thing and she showed us the advantages of, like, getting the number … the game part." In Gerri's opinion, "In the regular lessons we, like, don't play games; we just do questions." Jonathon replied "Games … Mr. T. doesn't do that. We learned the chances of 2 and 4 and it was fun." Keith responded, "Well, first, she's a special guest and she's like a professional, so we pay more attention to her. It's not like the overhead [Mr. T. usually used the overhead and transparencies to explain and illustrate many of his lessons], she gives us stuff to do and we do it first and then she explains it." Perhaps the most significant response was from Nadia:

> JP: How as Mrs. J's math class different?
> Nadia: Math was a game and you're learning at the same time.
> JP: Can you remember what she taught you?
> Nadia: Most of it.
> JP: If you roll two dice, which number if most likely to come up?
> Nadia: Seven.

Although they all mentioned the "game" aspect of the lesson as being unique and special, they appeared to have forgotten that many of the math activities designed by their teacher were also presented as games. However, what Nadia appears to allude to is the fact that she knew she was learning, something that she could not see occurring in her other classroom activities. It is also interesting to note that it was obvious that they did indeed learn something, and significantly, they could also remember what they had learned. In the course of our discussion of this particular lesson, I asked them all the same concluding question, "Which number is most likely to come up if you roll two dice?" I received the following responses:

Arthur: Like, getting two is hard because getting one and one is hard, but getting 7 and 6 was easy 'cause there's a lot more numbers to pick to get that number.

Jonathon: Four, seven or five.

Gerri: Uhhh … I think seven or eight

Keith: I had that … I think it's between six and eight (*He meant either 6 or 8*)

Lina: Uhhh … probably seven and then nine.

Andy: Seven, then six, eight or nine.

Nadia: Seven.

It is pertinent to note that in this lesson they worked with a single partner and each of them had a specific role to play: roll the dice, add them up, each record the number, after a set number of rolls, record each number on a frequency chart, and then draw a conclusion about frequency of occurrence. The class, as a whole then shared and tabulated the results, drew a conclusion about probability, and the consultant summarized the "findings" with them. She then discussed terms such as "probability", and "most and least likely." It was of more than passing interest for me to note that the three "low personal agency" students were the ones who remembered the most immediately relevant outcome: that 7 was the most likely number to come up when two dice are rolled. It is also pertinent to the preceding discussion of "learning as remembering" to note that a considerable time elapsed between the activity and when I asked them to recall what they had learned.

Although hardly conclusive research, the fact that the activity was a "game" could not account entirely for them remembering what they had learned. What was apparent was that the structure of the partnership used by the consultant for the game played an important role in the way the low agency students approached the task. Each of the students had a clearly defined role and responsibilities within the partnership (one had to role the dice and the other record and half way through they alternated roles), and the outcome of the activity was clearly defined and attainable for all the students. In addition, the process required them to exchange ideas and interpretations as they attempted to solve the puzzle, and the conclusions they reached were essentially collaborative. In other words, the major difference between the probability activity implemented by the consultant and their usual classroom learning configuration was that they could not avoid being actively engaged (nor, apparently, did they want to).

Discussion: Some Preliminary Implications

As I observed the students in their groups and their various classroom activities, I became aware of the ways in which the classroom activities, both overt and covert, marginalized, denied membership, and generally encouraged some of the students to assume passive roles. The low agency students in particular appeared to have very few strategies that would enable them to assume a more active role both as contributors to group activities or to their own learning. In fact, these students received a steady stream of ascriptive messages about themselves that indicated, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, that they were not very smart. They seldom received prescriptive messages that told them that, even though they were not currently doing something in the right way, they could take steps to correct it. Indications are that students are much more strongly influenced by ascriptive messages, those that relate to their identity (self as person), than prescriptive ones that relate to their behaviours (self as actor) (Chopra, 1993). This was evident in the classroom in that the low agency students were more likely to blame themselves for their lack of progress as learners, while the high agency students tended to locate the root of their learning problems externally. It was apparent that the high agency students were reasonably secure in their personal perspectives and many of their responses to the group learning and classroom procedures emanated from their sense of personal efficacy.

Students as "highly effective" learners

Stephen Covey (1989) in his depiction of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* suggests that before individuals can operate effectively within an interdependent situation, certain independent skills need to be in place. He maintains that "… we should remember that effective interdependence can only be built upon a foundation of true independence" (p. 185). He suggests that independent people display three major characteristics. The first is the ability to be "proactive". Being proactive, he suggests, "… means more than merely taking the initiative. It means that as human beings we are responsible for our own lives. Our behavior is a function of our decisions, not our conditions" (p. 71). In a sense, this implies that students may need to have attained a certain level of personal autonomy before they encounter social situations. They also may need to engage in situations where they can assert, practice and develop the sense of who and what they are, their personal agency. From my interactions with the students, it was readily apparent that simply placing them in situations where proactive behaviour was required was not sufficient; they also needed to know, or be aware of how proactive people (those with a developed sense of personal agency) think and act. An implication may be drawn that for low agency students the necessary skills for effective participation in group learning need to be taught. As Johnson et al. (1984) point out "Students who have never been taught how to work effectively with others cannot be expected to do so" (p. 43). Such skills may include the development of procedural strategies for keeping the group on task, finding efficient and effective ways of working together, using strategies for developing and maintaining a productive and positive atmosphere, and, in general, strategies that contribute to keeping the group moving in a coherent manner. As Johnson et al. point out, "Students are not born with interpersonal and group skills, nor do they magically appear when the students need them" (1984, p. 44). Thus, a second set of personal competencies that students may need for effective group learning would include the development of a sense that their contribution and opinions are valued and important, as well as the ability to be the 'other' in a group, to be the person who can respond empathetically, who knows when to let others speak, and who knows how to support the emerging understandings and even mis-understandings of others. In other words, they may need to learn how to be supporters as well as initiators. One day I witnessed Keith coaching Yin, the ESL student in the class. He devoted almost a whole lesson to helping Yin learn how to introduce the group project they had worked on. In order to do this introduction they spent the time together repeating the introductory phrases until Yin mastered them. Later, when Yin successfully did the introduction, there was a palpable pride displayed by both Yin and his coach, Keith.

According to Covey, the second characteristic of independent people is that they "begin with the end in mind" and he defines this characteristic: "To begin with the end in mind means to start with a clear understanding of your destination. It means to know where you're going so that you better understand where you are now and so that the steps you take are always in the right direction" (1989, p. 98). Certainly, I observed a great deal of "directionless" behavior and confusion on the part of the students, something that is possible in any learning situation. The pained looks, the confusion over directions, the "I don't get it!" or the eloquent silence in response to teacher prompts and questions are all part and parcel of every teacher's daily life in classrooms. For some of the students in the study, it was obvious that in most situations, they did not have a clear sense of either short-term or long-term outcomes. Despite their contention that they "asked the teacher" when they were not sure, the low agency students seldom did. It was only the high agency students who asked their teacher for clarification.

Covey depicts the third habit of "highly effective people" as the ability to "put first things first." He suggests that people who are proactive, who know where they are going and how they intend to get there, naturally know where to start. In his terms, putting first things first is "… the exercise of *independent will* toward becoming principle-centered. It's the day-in, day-out, moment-by-moment doing it" (p. 147 *original emphasis*). In many ways, this habit refers to the person's ability to organize and manage daily occurrences as well as the exigencies that mark a "normal" day. In the classroom, it may mean that students not only know where they are going, they also know how to get there in some reasonably productive manner. For some students it may mean that they need to know about how to approach and work through an assigned task, even if it is a group responsibility, and this may involve direct and explicit instructions from the teacher. The "first things first" idea reflects the ability to plan, to set priorities, to execute, and to complete the task at hand. It requires both a long- and short-term view of what is needed for success. For most of the high agency students, this was a taken-for-granted part of their group activity. They easily and readily assumed the various roles and responsibilities necessary for their success. For reasons, previously outlined, it was apparent that the system did not work in the same way for the low agency students. In fact, the more they engaged in these activities, the more their personal agency appeared to be diminished.

Although the "habits" proposed by Covey may develop as a by-product of group processes, for some students they may not be possible, particularly if the group "interaction level" moves beyond their zone of personal independent competencies. In other words, some students may need to be coached as to what constitutes effective interaction within a group setting. Johnson et al. (1984) allude to the "lazy" or "unmotivated" student and provide guidelines as to how such "problems" may be handled. However, my observations indicate that "laziness" is really rooted in each student's sense of personal control over the learning situation. Students who are unsure of themselves, of what they are supposed to accomplish, and how they are to proceed may be inclined to withdraw altogether from the activity. Appearing to be engaged is often so stressful that their attention cannot be sustained. The result is further confusion and frustration on the part of the student, with the concomitant effects on their energy and attention levels.

It was apparent that each of these eight students interpreted their classroom activities in different ways; however, given that classroom discourse is essentially a social construct, the need for students to develop some commonality in their interpretations of classroom procedures and the content of their learning seems to be self-evident. Christie (1995) has pointed out that in order to be academically successful students, no matter what their primary discourse is, need to be "apprenticed" into the discourse of schooling. From her research, Christie concluded that, in the course of everyday classroom interactions, most students do indeed access the majority of the elements of classroom discourse, and that teachers often implicitly scaffold their students' growth toward independent control of this discourse. However, other researchers have pointed out that the discourse "gap" may simply be too large for some students to overcome (Cummins, 1993; Rist, 1978), and that teachers are often not aware of the nature of the gap nor how it can be closed, particularly for involuntary minorities (Delpit, 1993; Ogbu, 1978; Pianta & Walsh, 1996). From their interviews with students that focused on the students' perceptions of literacy, Hudson-Ross et al. (1993) concluded that, for many children in schools, regardless of socio-economic status or cultural background, school remains a "place of bewilderment where a sense of purpose is hard to find" (p. xiii). Often the children in their study interpreted classroom activities in ways that contrasted sharply to commonly held theoretical notions of learning and how it should occur in classrooms. Thus, it would appear that what students see as the purpose for activities, how they think the activities should proceed, and who they look to for assistance when they are unsure of what to do, all play roles in what they learn and how they go about learning it. It is against this backdrop that I describe in the next chapter the students' perspectives on learning.

Summary

In this chapter, I have suggested that the interpretive frameworks students develop in the course of their school experiences play a critical role in how they view learning situations and their possibilities for successful learning. These frameworks are created and informed by the continuous stream of messages and meta-messages that students receive from their environment and from themselves. As Johnson and Johnson point out, "The social meanings that participants construct together are constantly being redefined through the give-and-take of face-to-face interaction" (1995, p. 124). In essence the complex of emotions, perceptions, and dispositions that ultimately lead to each student's sense of personal agency are socially constructed. The four students in the study who I perceived of as having "high personal agency" essentially saw themselves as being in control of their lives and subsequently their learning. In contrast, the three "low personal agency" students, each in their own way, generally displayed confusion and a form of debilitating alienation in the classroom. These students appeared to have internalized "rules and procedures" and understandings about their own learning which, in many ways, worked directly against them gaining personal control. Andy and Nadia, in particular, appeared to see responsibility for their learning as belonging to their teacher and they generally demonstrated a high level of confusion in their talk about their lives in the classroom. As a particular case, and in contrast to the low agency students, Arthur appeared to be well aware of his shortcomings in his literacy skills. His verbal skills were adequate and he appeared to be generally in charge of his learning and rather than confusion, it appeared that frustration was a more operative term in describing his situation.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE INTERPRETIVE ACCOUNT PART C: THE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF LEARNING

> I hear the word learning constantly. 'Are they learning?' — 'What are they learning?' — 'What did you learn?' ... I comprehend what people intend, but I am unable to conceive of a situation where learning does not take place. I am unable to see where it is possible to separate learning from experience. Learning takes place constantly: we learn when we are asleep, content, daydreaming, bored, angry, rapturous, and every other time, too.
>
> (Hern, 1996, pp. 4-5)

In Chapter 5 I indicated that the interpretive account would emerge from an interrelated process that involved analytic induction and constant comparison leading to the final stage of typological analysis, wherein the whole of the generated data is taken apart and put back together in new interpretive forms (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). In a sense, typological analysis involves broadening the scope of the discussion to present some overarching thematic interpretations of the data that have been generated. Graue and Walsh (1998) depict this stage of the research process as "theorized explanation," and they see it following from the "rich description" that the researcher has provided. In their view, "theorized explanation ... go[es] below the surface, to the invisible, to an understanding of what the mundane social life of human interactions means" (p. 95). Thus, the final stage in an interpretive account may be accomplished or completed when the researcher attempts to explain why events and situations appear in the ways they do, and what they mean to the participants. Graue and Walsh see this final stage as making description "less local, moving ... [it] ... to *instances of something* rather than isolated observations" (p. 95, *original emphasis*). Chapter 8 moves in this direction as it expands upon the data to create a broader interpretation/perspective of the descriptions and analyses provided previously. It attempts to capture the meanings of the "mundane life" that the students experienced in this particular classroom; to make apparent the "invisible" (and visible) messages and signals that contributed to the views of learning that the students derived from their experiences.

It was the invisible messages that emerged from my observations of the students' day-to-day acts and responses to their lives in the classroom that proved to be most revealing. In various ways, their individual perspectives on learning were often marked by paradox, contradiction, confusion, game playing, political maneuvering, isolation, frustration, and quite often, alienation. In their comments, disclosures, and asides, in their acts and responses in the classroom, the hallways and the playground, they shared with me a view of learning in classrooms that was intimately related to the struggle that they had to make sense of an adult view of learning and how it should occur. The Webster dictionary defines something that is "of little worth" as "trivial" and for each of the students in the inquiry, in unique and particular ways, learning was essentially trivialized in that they could see little of worth in what they were required to do.

The Trivialization of Learning

> Pedagogically, the highest priority is in having children and young people gain precisely a sense of the human world as being a narrative construction that can be entered and engaged creatively; to have a sense that received understanding can be interpreted or re-interpreted and that all human responsibility is fulfilled in precisely a taking up of this task. (Smith, 1991, p. 201)

> Even when researchers [and teachers] are not conscious of working within the general parameters of positivism, the latter still exerts a powerful influence — an influence which considers reflexive questions to be both undesirable and unnecessary. (Scott & Usher, 1999, p. 9)

The observations of Smith on one hand and Scott and Usher on the other provide the contrasting and often conflicting contexts within which the teacher and the students found themselves. On one hand, Smith suggests that learning is a continuous and contiguous act of creative interpretation, while Scott and Usher point out that, learning in schools is often presented to students as decontextualized and disconnected. In the two previous chapters, I provided a number of illustrative examples of situations wherein the "low-agency" students, and quite often, the "high agency" students also, appeared unable to make personal sense of the content of instruction or the instructional sequences with which they were presented. Although their teacher did attempt to make their learning worthwhile, interesting and important, it was apparent that he was caught up in web of often conflicting demands and tensions that conspired, as Scott and Usher point out, to situate his students' learning in an essentially positivist paradigm. Mr. T. often attempted to create situations designed to encourage interactive exchanges and creative encounters with the "human world" (to paraphrase the opening quote from David Smith); however, the bottom line for both Mr. T. and his students remained individual accountability for a narrow range of outcomes. The ubiquitous and pervasive influence of the *Provincial Achievement Tests* with their short decontextualized passages, multiple choice response formats, and "story starter" writing provided the most compelling example of how learning in this classroom was trivialized for both students and teacher.

The influence of mandated achievement testing programs.

When I first broached the subject of the mandated *Provincial Achievement Tests* that all Grade 6 students in Alberta are required to write at the end of the year, it was because I was mainly interested in the students' interpretation of their relative importance. The teacher with assistance from the Principal devoted much time and effort to preparing the students for the tests and the importance of doing their "best" was consistently stressed to the students. Such emphasis was a political necessity in that the "results" of the tests are published for public consumption and the "effectiveness" of a school's instructional program is often equated with the results. For teachers in "inner-city" schools, these tests often represent a source of frustration and considerable stress (Maynes, 1990). For Mr. T. and the principal, who were both aware of the students' shortcomings, particularly as they related to the writing of tests, this was a particularly stressful and demanding time. In an effort to prepare the students, the teacher had them practice formatting and writing letters, creating "stories", doing sample tests from previous years, making up questions, and reviewing the topics and subject content that they had "covered" during the year. As I was only present in the class in the morning, it was obvious that I could not gauge the full extent of the review process, but I knew it was extensive and comprehensive. In light of the build up to the tests, I was interested in listening to the students' interpretation of the importance of the tests and their understanding of what they were supposed to do on them. Their response to my question, "What do you do if you don't know the answer on a multiple choice test?" provides one indication of their approach to, and perspective on the tests.

Andy: See how it is and look it over to see what shape it is in your mind from your science book. Then take the one you see in your mind.

Jonathon: Uhmm … skip it and I'll do the other ones and after I'm done, I'll look into it, and sometimes if I don't know the answer, I'll just try to pick one and hope that it's right.

Gerri: Thought about the question, looked at the answers. It was there, so it was right. If I don't know the answer then I guess: eeny, meeny, miny, mo, or try to think about it.

Keith: You can guess and you might get it right. Probably sometimes on exams there might be a few words that I have no idea, but it still had to be done; so I just guessed. I thought, mmm … what one will it be: "A-B-C-D-E"? I'll just do "E" here and I'll do "C" here. … You have a one out of four chance.

Lina: Hah! … Eeny, meeny, miny, mo … Hah!

Arthur: I just guess: eeny, meeny, mo. Except on math, I can get it.

Nadia: I don't know.

In many ways, the students reflect the way this particular form of testing game is typically played out in institutionalized settings. Although they did not consider it so, the practice may represent a certain ethical dilemma for the students and their teacher. I know that I have always advised students to "never leave any multiple choice question blank." In retrospect, and in light of the students' responses, I wonder what I was telling/teaching them about learning. In some ways, this practice indicates one of the inauthentic ways the school learning system works in the lives of both students and teachers. It is of more than passing interest to note that in the ongoing discussion of the validity of multiple choice tests, seldom is the subverting influence of the student guessing strategy acknowledged. Test items are validated and tests are normed as a result of analyses of students' responses, and critical educational decisions are often based upon the results of these tests. One can only speculate how many educational policies have been produced, curriculum development decisions made, and political pronouncements issued, not to mention the stress placed on teachers, school administrators and students, based on groups of 11 and 12-year olds gazing at their machine scored answer sheets and conscientiously iterating "eeny, meeny, miny, mo!"

Basically, normative testing as represented in Provincial Achievement Tests is founded upon a paradigm, in which learning is viewed as being reducible to its component parts. Students practice and are tested on isolated cognitive skills based on the theoretical contention that they will be able to accomplish the whole task in its entirety when they are called upon at a later date. This view of learning is underwritten by the notion that intelligent behavior depends upon an individual's ability to manipulate abstract propositions that have a direct correspondence to a fixed reality (Langer, 1997). The extent of such learning can be determined by assessing how well the learner can use his or her cognitive map to solve abstract problems that are hypothetically related to the real world. Thus, answering multiple choice questions after reading a short decontextualized passage is equated with the ability to read. Similarly, students' abilities to answer multiple choice questions related to social studies material is considered an indication of their capacity to become contributing citizens to a democratic society. Ultimately, the consummate indicator of intelligence rests on the speed with which a person can accomplish a task or solve a problem (Langer, 1997). Thus, in a broader context, students who fail to learn within the prescribed learning period (whether it be lesson, unit, or grade), or who cannot complete assignments or tests in an allotted time are classed as "slow" learners. Learning, based on this model of intelligence is viewed as "A linear process moving from problem to resolution as rapidly as possible" (Langer, 1997, p. 110), and, in general, this was the view of learning that was embedded in the prescribed instructional program with its emphasis on curriculum coverage and external achievement standards.

The students' views of writing.

When the students were exposed to the somewhat fragmented view of learning described above, the results, as I have indicated, were usually highly problematic for the students (and quite often for their teacher). From the discussions I have presented, it is apparent that the low agency students did not clearly understand the purpose for many of the classroom activities nor did they know how to go about engaging in the learning tasks assigned by their teacher; subsequently, they were seldom able to complete the assigned tasks within the allotted class time. Their confusion with learning in the classroom reflected their inability to situate all of the pieces within a relevant or authentic framework; it had little real reference to their familiar discourses. Their responses to a practice "writing" activity designed to replicate and prepare them for the Provincial Achievement Tests (PAT's) contained in the following conversation extracts are illustrative of the somewhat atomized, disconnected view of writing/learning that they had internalized.

JP: [Do you consider yourself to be] … A good writer?

Jonathon: Not so much cause I mix up my theres, their, they're; so I'm still kind of good. I can write good beginnings of stories and then I get side tracked and I put, like, too much detail in one sentence and make it too long and then put too little detail and make it too short.

JP: Were you sure what to do on the assignment?

Jonathon: We were supposed to create a story like for a movie director and we're supposed to put in our apostrophes, periods, quotations (marks) and ahh … uhm … put in, like, paragraphs and describe the characters, describe the setting, say where it is.

JP: What are you working on in writing?

Gerri: Uhmm ... description, like, make it more interesting and use more interesting words.

JP: What were you supposed to do on that assignment?
Lina: You have to, like, read a story and then ... a story ... and then write down for the director to see to stories for about a movie ... a betend one [pretend one].

JP: Were you clear about what you had to do [in writing the "story" for the Grade 6 Provincial Achievement Test]?
Arthur: Yeah: What, where, year, title, event 1,2,3, then start the story. Make up a movie to a director and explain you want a movie done on paper, write it down and hand it in to a director, and he's going to make it into a movie.
JP: What are you working on in writing?
Arthur: Mostly spelling, nothing else. It's not that bad!

JP: Do you remember the last one [a writing prompt] with the picture? How did you do on that one?
Nadia: It was better than the last one [which was a sentence story starter]
JP: Why?
Nadia: I don't know!
JP: How was it easier than the last one?
Nadia: [Long pause] ... I was using paragraphs ... uhmm ... I was using paragraphs.
JP: Anything else you did better?
Nadia: I did less "ands"!

JP: Were you sure what to do [for the writing test]?
Andy: No!
JP: What did you think you had to do?
Andy: Uhmm ... write letter... put descriptive action, describing words, action. I just put trannnnsss [unclear what is meant here] words, not describing words. I had to finish my story.
JP: Things you are working on in your writing?
Andy: What?
JP: [Repeats question].
Andy: Uhmm ... Two things I didn't forget it and see what mistakes and look at the words on the paper, the describing words to see if it makes sense.

One reading of the above comments indicates that each of the students interpreted what was of importance in the writing assignment from a different perspective, and it is equally obvious that there is more to writing than the students presented in this instance. What they appear to feel is important in their writing are the particular skills that they had practiced in preparation for the test. In general, their focus is principally on the external features of writing, and, given the context, this is not surprising. Essentially, even though they did practice writing "whole" stories and letters in class, it was generally after they had received specific instruction and practice on those elements that their teacher had identified as important to their writing. They also focussed on elements that weren't emphasized in the classroom (at least when I was present), elements that appeared to be located in their past experiential memories of writing and school instruction in general. The most obvious of these was contained in their view of effective writing (and the view of many parents and the public at large) as being directly related to correct spelling. As Arthur so cogently observed, his efforts to improve his writing were focussed on "Mostly spelling, nothing else." Even though the teachers did stress that the reason the students needed to develop these skills and understandings was in order to apply them, the students' views reflected the instructional information that they interpreted as being important. Overall, it appears from their responses that they were not entirely aware of how control of the various grammatical and rhetorical elements ultimately could contribute to their abilities to express their ideas in writing (or write a "story"). Schommer and Walker (1995) in their research into students' beliefs about learning, reached the conclusion that "... if the students believe that knowledge is best characterized as isolated bits of information, this may lead them to believe that recall of a list of definitions constitutes knowing" (p. 424). For the students in the study, the way they thought about writing in this instance appears to be somewhat haphazard, and it reflects a general uncertainty about why they were writing in the first place.

It is, of course, possible to "read" their comments about writing from an alternative or rival perspective, one that acknowledges that each of the students may have interpreted my prompt/question from a student-to-teacher perspective (Donaldson, 1978). In other words, they may have been attempting to provide me, as teacher, with a display of what they had "learned" in school about writing. In addition, it is pertinent to recall that Jonathon had won a contest for best class essay based on his response to the DARE program which was presented to the class by a member of the local police force.

During the time I was in the class, Keith wrote and presented to the class via *Power Point* presentation software, a science fiction myth, parts of which were later used in a language arts text for university students as an exemplar of how students can effectively incorporate technology into their writing. In their everyday classroom activities both Marion and Gerri were fairly expressive and competent writers. Anthony's description of the writing assignment appears to be comprehensive, and he certainly sounds like a writer who knows how to get things done: "What, where, year, event, 1,2,3, start the story …!" However, as I have pointed out previously, Arthur always needed to appear competent and in control and so he often covered up his shortcomings or inadequacies with explanations that seemed persuasive. Thus, the process he claimed to have used in the writing assignment was essentially a "cover up", as my reading of his story indicated that he had not produced a coherent response to the prompt. Andy indicates that he had picked up the idea that revision is important in writing "to see if it makes sense," while Nadia may have been attempting to explain the need to bring clarity to her writing by organizing it into paragraphs and eliminating run-on sentences ("less 'ands'"). Based on this "rival reading" (Graue & Walsh, 1998), the students seem to indicate that they are aware of what was required of them when writing a story stimulated by a somewhat nebulous "story starter" prompt. Although I did not analyze their written responses extensively, I did have opportunity to read their "movie script" stories. From this cursory examination, it was apparent that the students' focus was on trying to make sense of and fulfill the terms of the assignment; in general, their claims to be focussing on particular elements were not apparent in the writing that they produced.

Based upon the foregoing reading, it may be apparent that the students had learned something about writing, and, from a conventional perspective, it could be claimed that they have a sense of some of the skills that constitute school based writing. In addition, they give the impression that in the assignment they are consciously attempting to fit these skills into their overall schema for writing. However, when viewed from a "meaning making" perspective, there is a great deal missing from their descriptions of writing. In the final analysis, such considerations as personal commitment, voice, perspective, and simply caring about what they were "saying" were subsumed in their concern for detail and peripheral considerations. As Donald Graves has metaphorically pointed out, for children in schools quite often "… so much time is devoted to blocking and tackling drills, that there is not time to play the real game, writing" (1983, p. 65). When viewed from a perspective that depicts the personal expression of meaningful ideas as a critical aspect of writing, such "story" writing assignments may contribute to students' devaluing writing, leading them to assiduously avoid it if at all possible. Keith's response to the practice writing assignment, which involved writing a story script for a movie director (a prompt previously used on the PAT's), perhaps captures and summarizes how such assignments may serve to trivialize students' views of writing in schools:

> I don't like the prompt. It's like the movie doesn't give you much of a subject to write about. It's just like read a story; see if it's good for a movie and everyone was like writing about killing and blood and stuff. [*and he continued*]
>
> I didn't have enough time and we had to do it in 45 [minutes] and that was it, and Mr. T gave us extra time so we had to like erase and reread. I wrote about this hamster that went to Hollywood and messed up everybody. I didn't get enough time, so it wasn't really good.

Keith alludes to the fact that when Mr. T. observed that the students were not completing the writing assignment appropriately (or were simply unable to make sense of it), he gave them some time to go over their stories and revise them so that they would eventually make some kind of sense, an indication, perhaps, of just how problematic this assignment was for the students in the class. Keith's comments about the superficial way he perceived his own writing (and the efforts of his classmates), further emphasize the shallow and inauthentic nature of this form of writing "assessment". From a certain perspective, it is ironic that conclusions reached by non-educators about students' abilities to "write" are often based solely upon such time constrained, hastily thought up and frantically revised stories about "a hamster who goes to Hollywood and messes everyone up." Unfortunately, much of the functional, personal and reflective writing that students do daily in classrooms is essentially overlooked and often discounted. It is even more distressing to note that when these writing "tests" are graded and sorted by Departments or Ministries of Education, the results are published so that school districts, schools, teachers, parents and the media can assess, comment upon, and critique the status of students' writing abilities.

The bottom line, based on either of the preceding two, of the many possible, "readings" I have presented, appears to be that what these students considered important information to remember about writing was essentially of little worth to them, both in their immediate and future writing. As Perkins (1992), in his discussion of the need for *Smart Schools*, points out,

> Recently, cognitive psychologists ... and others have underscored the troubling feature of typical classroom learning: its decontextualized character. What happens in school mathematics, writing, or the study of history, for example, bears little resemblance to what mathematicians, authors, or historians do. Nor does it resemble in-context uses of mathematics, writing, or history by nonprofessionals—in the supermarket, on the tax form, in formulating a personal statement for a job application, in understanding current events. (p. 67)

Perkins captures the essence of the problem that the students had with this particular writing assignment. Not only did it have little relevance to their lives, it also was clearly contrived to produce a type of writing that had little connection to any writing that they might do in the real world. When this was coupled with their perceptions of what were the essential elements of writing (particularly those that they shared with me), it was not surprising that they had difficulty fulfilling the requirements of the writing "test", and, furthermore, why they experienced so much frustration with it.

Learning as "trivial pursuit".

The students' views of writing were, in many ways, a reflection of their views of learning in general. For any number of reasons the students had picked up and unknowingly ingested a perspective that cast learning as a random collection of ideas, information and skills. Perkins (1992) depicts this theory as the "trivial pursuit theory of learning" which posits that "learning is a matter of accumulating facts and routines" (p. 20). Unfortunately, for the low agency students and in some ways for the other students the facts and routines that they "worked" so hard to accumulate appeared in their learning as unproductive, almost random sequences. They could not apparently see how the pieces fit together in a coherent whole, and they had few strategies for doing so. As I have indicated in previous chapters, attempts to modify their approach to learning were not very successful. Mr. T.'s exhortations and admonishments telling them that they "had to improve their listening skills, pay attention, or read the instructions carefully," as I have pointed out were internalized, but proved ineffectual in improving the students' abilities to learn. In fact, in many ways they served to reinforce those already firmly entrenched feelings of inadequacy that the students experienced almost continuously.

In addition to the fact that "trivial" learning attempts to focus students' attention on disconnected, decontextualized pieces of information or isolated skills, learning is also trivialized when it avoids dealing with puzzling situations or confusing elements (Caine & Caine, 1997). In many ways, in this Grade 6 classroom, attempts by the teacher to engage the students in situations that challenged them to extend their thinking through response to learning activities were countered by the way the students perceived the situation. For example, because of the sustained emphasis on accountability, most of the students viewed any post reading activities as control devices rather than as opportunities for demonstrating or extending their understanding or engaging with and responding to the ideas they had encountered in the text. When I asked them what they saw as the purpose for post reading activities, Jonathon replied "So the teacher will know if we paid attention to the story." Keith presented a more balanced perspective, but he still felt that the activities were designed to ensure that he was on task, "They, like, make you comprehend what you read. If you're just reading and not paying attention, it will show, but if you're ... like reading, like, you understand, you can do the questions easily." When I asked Lina "Are the (post-reading) activities useful to you?" She replied, "Sort of! Like, it was a test, right? Like it would show if I paid attention. Like, hearing Mr. T. read it. Sometimes I do and sometimes I don't understand, and then I don't know, like, what to do in the activities." As might be anticipated, although they took part in the activities in a limited sense, neither Andy nor Nadia could explain the purpose for such activities except as a means whereby their teacher could monitor and control their behavior. For all of the students, and my experience tells me for most students, reading in school was principally defined as something they did in order to "do activities" or "answer questions." In all of our discussions about their experiences with reading, seldom did they talk about the ideas in their reading nor did they mention that it was a personally relevant learning experience.

I have previously documented the extent to which the students generally regarded learning as an "activity" to be completed in the shortest time possible with the least expenditure of energy in order to fulfill their teacher's expectations. In general, it appeared that they had not developed (and perhaps had chosen not to develop) a sense of personal commitment or responsibility usually associated with learning. They gave every indication that they viewed learning as something that happened to them, and they basically saw themselves as passive receptors of their teacher's teaching. With the exception of Keith, who had developed a certain forbearance of his required role in the classroom, they were unable to define a substantive role for themselves, and they did not appear to know how they might develop this role. There were notable exceptions to this observation. When they engaged in activities that required them to report upon or present their own understanding, either individually or as a group, and when the activity required peer feedback and/or self-evaluation, they revealed a much more active learning persona. There were obvious indications of how such activities might contribute to and expand their perceptions of themselves as learners. Unfortunately, although their teacher appeared to implicitly recognize how such activities provided substantial indications of his students' learning, he was constrained by the need to account for each of his student's learning in a particular fashion, through marks and grades garnered from paper and pencil tests and assignments.

Learning as work.

It was not surprising to me that, both in their classroom responses and their descriptions of learning, most of the students thought about learning in terms of products. As in most classrooms, the controlling learning metaphor was one of production (Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Phelan, 1994). As I described in Chapter 7, the high agency students' primary focus was on ensuring that they produced credible evidence for their teacher that they had engaged in the activity or fulfilled a particular assignment adequately. For many of them, the principle that guided their actions was one of parsimony, of producing acceptable evidence of learning with the least effort within the shortest possible time. In Marion's depiction, the more students on a project, the more readily the task could be subdivided, and subsequently, the greater the possibility of finishing quickly. It was interesting that the "reward" or "pay-off" for early finishing was usually a series of ill-defined "goofing off", chatting, or visiting activities interspersed with trying to look busy when Mr. T. was looking at them. It is perhaps pointing to the obvious to note that, from a teaching perspective, having students accept the notion of learning as work is often critical, as external productivity "incentives" serve key control and discipline functions in most classrooms. Overall, it was the need for the teacher to assign each student marks and grades and to generally be able to furnish evidence of students' learning progress (or lack of it), that dictated the need to retain "production" as the controlling metaphor for learning in the classroom.

Learning as production was part of an overall work metaphor that dominated learning in the class, as it does in most classrooms in North America (Bowers & Flinders, 1990). When learning is seen as being finished on the completion of activities and intelligence is seen as relative to the speed at which tasks are accomplished, it is a natural step to view learning as work. As I indicated in the discussion of the classroom grouping procedures, the students were well aware that productivity counted as the primary indicator of learning, and that the appearance of cooperative "on-task" behavior was more important than any actual interactive "learning" exchanges that may have occurred.

In her book, *The Power of Mindful Learning*, Ellen Langer examines several "myths" which, despite their debilitating effects, continue to dominate educational theory and practice. These "myths" include the idea that practice makes perfect, that rote memorization is necessary to learning, that forgetting is a problem, and that there are right and wrong answers, all of which she discusses in detail in her book. However, the "myth" that is pertinent to the present discussion is the one that posits that "delaying gratification is important" (Langer, 1997, Ch. 3), the idea that if the individual "works hard" on a current task, he or she will be rewarded later. In schools this idea plays out most often as "when you have finished your work, then you can play" and it is usually introduced very early in children's school careers. Children soon become aware that learning in school is arduous and often unpleasant work; while "play" time is a reward for work that is completed in a satisfactory manner. For the students in the inquiry, simply "not working" was usually considered ample reward for completing their assigned tasks. There is, however, much more involved in school learning than simply work and play, for the factory metaphor, as it is applied to life in classrooms, is more pervasive and influential than it might appear on the surface (Apple & King, 1977; Bowers & Flinders, 1996; Giroux, 1990).

Myers and Simpson (1998) point out that, "The *schools as factories* metaphor became popular near the start of the 20th century and is embedded in the thinking about early industrialization in the United States" (p. 3, *emphasis added*). They go on to describe how this conceptualization leads to schools designed and run by "bureaucratically authorized experts … wherein production and efficiency are the guiding management principles … (which they believe) … are antithetical to schools as learning communities" (p. 3). At the classroom level, teachers may often unwittingly incorporate these principles into their everyday instruction. For example, teachers may ostensibly reject the ideological perception of schools as factories with its production model of learning, yet they continue to use the vocabulary and procedures associated with the factory assembly line.

Teachers are often unaware of the metaphorical nature of language and thought and the underlying metaphors that control and direct their classroom practice (Bowers & Flinders, 1990). Thus, despite their teacher's professed theoretical orientation, most children still engage in learning activities that focus on the completion of *worksheets, workbooks, workshops, seatwork,* and *homework.* Students are "paid" for their productivity with "free time" when they have "completed their work." In addition, marks and grades and other productivity and performance incentives are offered and usually expected by the students (for example, the wall displays that chart each child's learning productivity). Children who miss school have to "make up their work" and those who fail to fill their day's learning quota have to "take their work home" to be completed as homework. Children are most often "promoted" or "held back" based principally upon their ability to meet predetermined production quotas and quality control standards that are determined by curriculum developers or, in many cases, by textbook publishers. Seldom does the classroom teacher determine them. In addition, students are required to develop appropriate "work habits." Those with acceptable or appropriate "work habits" are recognized and rewarded, those who have fail to develop appropriate work habits are admonished and punished (usually by way of critical report card comments). Students with "poor work habits" are sometimes classified as being in some way disabled (Pianta & Walsh, 1996), while for some teachers, good work habits are equated with creativity (Peterson, 1997). Thus, children are usually categorized as *poor* or *good* workers based mainly upon their diligence, perseverance, and ability to conform to predetermined behavioural standards within specified time limits (Apple & King, 1977). In this "technist" view of learning (Bowers & Flinders, 1990), low agency students such as Nadia and Andy would be considered poor workers who had failed to develop "good" work habits. As they often failed to "get down to work," they seldom were able to meet their required learning quotas. Their schoolwork was "below standard" and in all likelihood, they were headed for "failure". In effect, the learning-as-work metaphor allows the major blame for this failure to be attributed to the students themselves. One conclusion that may be drawn from this inquiry is that when learning is narrowly defined as behavioral "products", and when this definition fails to take into account how students think about learning and themselves as learners, efforts to improve or enhance student learning may continue to be misdirected.

The production metaphor of learning also impinges in subtle ways on what students consider to be worth retaining as learning, a contention that is best illustrated in their responses to their experiences with a science unit centred on the theme of "Flight". In the course of the unit, Mr. T. constantly emphasized that it was "very important" that they know the principles of flight. When I asked them "Why is it important to learn the principles of flight?" I received the following responses:

Keith: Uhmm ... well, you have to know what's happening around you so like you go outside and see the wind blowing and the trees and you see an airplane and you have to learn what they're doing and what they are.

Nadia: Uhmm ... I don't know. I can remember all of them: Drag weight, lift, and uhmm ... .

Gerri: Then if you know them, you get the question right. I don't know how an airplane would fly like ailerons or whatever; just interesting stuff!

Jonathon: Well, it might be in Junior High or High school that we had in Gr. 6 and *IT'S ON THE PROVINCIALS*!

Lina: So, if you grow up someone might want to be a pilot or something and then know what it is and help to ... The program again but we know some of the program and we can like pass like some … the pilot.

Andy: I don't know.

It is interesting to juxtapose their responses upon the actual activities they engaged in during the course of the unit. As part of the unit Mr. T showed them how to construct model airplanes and the students test flew them in the hallway. Based on their observations, they made adjustments to wings, tail fins and ailerons in order to promote better flight patterns. Their excitement and engagement was apparent and their desire to share their learning was authentic and personal ("Mr. Proctor, come and see this!" "Mr. Proctor, can you hold this while I attach my new wings?" "Mr. Proctor, any idea why my plane keeps dipping to one side?"). They openly discussed their findings and problems with their teacher, who had made his own plane and was test flying it with the students. As they investigated how they could solve various flight problems, they spent extended periods of high concentration adjusting the planes so that they would fly better. Thus, the principles of flight were important to them in their immediate application to specific personal challenges.

However, even though they did allude to real world applications in our discussions. Lina suggested it would be important if "someone wants to be a pilot," and I wondered at the time if she saw herself as that someone. Keith implied that it is a basic human trait to attempt to explain natural phenomena. Parenthetically, I noted that none of them considered that they might become airplane designers; the critical reason for having to remember the principles of flight was that questions about them would appear on the Provincial Achievement Tests. In a very real sense, due to the pervasive influence of the productivity model of learning, this is what their teacher felt obliged to stress as being important in their learning. Thus, their visit to the local aviation museum, their hands-on experiences with air flow, ailerons, and wing shape, all of their engagement, excitement, experimentation, explanations and thinking in general about these principles; in fact, all of their teacher's careful preparations were essentially reduced to a series of responses on a multiple-choice exam as the primary indicator of what they had learned.

Summary and Conclusion

In this particular classroom, many of the activities and instructional sequences indicated to the students that learning was essentially something that was done to satisfy an external agency. Although they did have opportunities to engage in meaningful learning, the major emphasis in the classroom fell on learning as production, and they inevitably felt that their scores and marks from tests and assignments indicated their effectiveness as learners. With some isolated exceptions, they tended to feel little ownership for their learning and they generally avoided learning as much as possible. The shortcomings of this paradigm were evident in a variety of ways. Despite its "triviality" (or because of it) the "high agency" students had learned to operate within the system and make it work for them, and except for Keith and Arthur, they did not openly question it. Although they found it frustrating at times, they had learned to adapt to it and accepted it as the way the learning was supposed to proceed. In a very real sense, the "trivial" nature of some of the learning activities they engaged in indicated to them just how unimportant "school" learning was. In fact, it may be claimed that the "skills" and dispositions that the students had developed or were developing were of little use except in the school setting. John Holt, writing almost four decades ago, cogently expresses this contention:

> We like to say that we send children to school to teach them to think. What we do, all too often, is to teach them to think badly, to give up a natural and powerful way of thinking in favor of a method that does not work well for them and that we rarely use ourselves.

> What are the results? Only a few children in school ever become good at learning in the way we try to make them learn. Most of them get humiliated, frightened, and discouraged. They use their minds, not to learn, but to get out of doing the things we tell them to do—to make them learn. In the short run, these strategies seem to work. They make it possible for many children to get through their schooling even thought they learn very little. But in the long run these strategies are self-limiting and self-defeating, and destroy both character and intelligence. The children who use such strategies are prevented by them from growing into more than limited versions of the human beings they might have become. This is the real failure that takes place in school; hardly any children escape. (1967, pp. vii - viii)

It is somewhat disheartening to note that the students expected that their "learning" in Junior High school would follow the same pattern, except that they anticipated that it would be "harder" and that they could expect even less support than they had received in their elementary careers. In Jonathon's view, they "might be working on projects alone and harder assignments, meeting new friends, and everything will be harder than Grade 6." Despite this, or perhaps because of it, the high agency students were looking forward to the change and appeared somewhat prepared for the new challenges they would face. The "low agency" students gave every indication that, after seven years of schooling, they had not successfully figured out how the school game was played. In fact, the more they engaged with it, the more confused they appeared to become. They were apprehensive about their future prospects and I had a sense that the only thing they had to fall back upon was the realization that they had survived the school system to this point in their lives, and that their lives outside it were reasonably secure.

CHAPTER NINE

A REPORT OF THE RESEARCHER'S LEARNING

> One could paraphrase Abraham Herschel's statement that "As a thing man is explicable; as a person he is both mystery and a surprise" to read, as a social process education is both explicit and measurable; as it affects the student as a person it is both problematic and a mystery for it is implicitly a private experience. (Bowers, 1974, p.1)

In any number of ways, this thesis represents an active and conscious attempt to delve into the "mystery" of how the "social process of education" affects students, and to make public in an empathetic and constructive way what Bowers (1974) sees as an implicitly private experience. In essence, this public interpretation evolves from a somewhat naïve question into a tale of contradiction, of paradox and of incongruity. Contained within the various descriptions, anecdotes, reports, and conversations, the texts that constitute classroom life, is a litany of good intentions gone awry and practices that often worked counter to the way they were intended. There are aspects of this account that detail the frustrations experienced by both teacher and students as they attempted to make sense of, and exist within, a system of learning based upon somewhat disabling theories and notions about the way children should or ought to learn (Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Cherryholmes, 1988; Graue & Walsh, 1998; Smith, 1993). In particular, the account details the extent to which many adultcentric perspectives on learning presented problems for eight particular students in their daily classroom encounters with learning in an "inner-city" school. Despite Bowers' contention cited above, the interpretive account that evolved from this inquiry suggests that even though it may be somewhat problematic and "messy" to inquire into and present the "mystery" of how students perceive their learning in schools, it can be done. It also suggests that efforts to gather and interpret the perspectives of students may be revealing and informing for all those who care about children and how they are "educated".

Research conducted within an interpretive or hermeneutic perspective acknowledges the possibility (even necessity) that any event, act, interaction, text, or conversation is open to a number of possible readings (Crowley, 1989; Fish, 1980). As John Smith points out

> Interpretivists hold that there is no bottom line or foundation upon which to construct our knowledge; there is no privileged way, or privileged position, from which to understand the world. This absence of a foundation for knowledge means that no interpretation is uniquely right or wrong. (1992, p. 101)

In fact, one of the simultaneously enlivening and disconcerting aspects of this thesis may well be that it draws specific attention to the multiple and diverse interpretations that students place upon their experiences with learning in the classroom. In many ways it is the overt acknowledgement and exploration of multiple possible interpretations that distances interpretive research from traditional controlled studies that tended to place their major focus on the search for the most (or, at the least, more) efficient and effective way to manage, direct, and generally control student learning. In addition, the final account is situated within the "best" interpretation that the researcher can develop. So, rather than attempting to eliminate them, interpretive research begins and ends with an acknowledgement of the researcher's prejudices (Gadamer, 1990) and the interpretive account that emerges from the data is intended to be read against this backdrop (Ellis, 1998).

Thus, in my foreclosure I indicated that one of my intents was to problematize the claim that formal education works, and I suggested that experimental research that has tended to focus on fixing or "changing" parts of the system may have failed to take into account the ways in which "schooling" by its very nature induces learning disabilities in students. I have also suggested that an emerging perspective driven by hermeneutic impulses indicates that educators can no longer ignore the fact that learning is embedded in a complex ecology of interactions of which the child as learner is the primary actor (Davis & Sumara, in press; Nuthall, 1999a, 1999b; Perkins, 1992). Thus, based on the perspectives of the eight students in the inquiry, I have actively and consciously attempted to deconstruct some of the dominant myths about learning and teaching that have traditionally carried an unassailable and unquestioned status in education circles. This, in many ways, is the critical element of hermeneutic research, to question assumptions, to upset habitual ways of thinking and acting in order to open up and explore the world of possibilities that is always imminent. As David Smith (1991) points out,

> Indeed in a time when the very act of thinking has become the target of intense commercial and political manipulation, the need is great for persons who can meaningfully deconstruct what is going on and propose alternative, more creative ways of thinking and acting. (p. 199)

Thus, the discussions that follow present a number of interpretations, some of which are consciously and unavoidably speculative. Notwithstanding the traditional aversion to speculations, the contentions and conclusions I present appear to me to be sensible in the particular contexts in which they are situated, for in addition to the interpretivist contention that there are essentially no uniquely right or wrong interpretations, it must be acknowledged that "Interpretations are not a product of taste or emotive response; they must be supported by reasons, the presentation of examples and careful judgements" (Smith, 1992, p. 102). In essence, it becomes apparent that the final stage of interpretive inquiry necessarily involves the presentation of the theoretical positions that the researcher has derived for the entire process. Morse (1994) explains,

> *Theorizing* is the constant development and manipulation of malleable theoretical schemes until the "best" theoretical scheme is developed. It is a process of speculation and conjecture, of falsification and verification, of selecting, revising, and discarding. If one ever finishes, the final "solution" is the theory that provides the best comprehensive, coherent, and simplest model for linking diverse and unrelated facts in a useful pragmatic way. (p. 32, *original emphasis*)

The discussion that follows derives its substance from what the students shared in our conversations (which, in many ways, did not require my interpretation), my observations of their classroom interactions and my personal experiences and reflections as a teacher and researcher. What emerges is my "best" interpretation of the situation and its ultimate aim is to present the interpretations in "a useful pragmatic way."

Reflective Conclusion 1

> *The majority of traditional research (and opinion) into what constitutes learning in classrooms has tended to be under-informed in that it has disregarded, overlooked, or discounted the viewpoints and perspectives of students.*

A great deal of our current understanding or perception of the way children learn has been derived from studies in which children have been considered the object of inquiry (Graue & Walsh, 1998). As Graue and Walsh point out "Little attention has been paid to the contexts in which children live" (p. 1). In addition, thinking about learning (and subsequently teaching) has been driven by beliefs that have been variously termed "analogic, generative and iconic metaphors" (Bowers & Flinders, 1990), "premature cognitive commitments" (Langer, 1997), or "transcendental signifieds" (Cherryholmes, 1988), which are essentially "myths" about learning that have come to assume an unquestioned and apparently unassailable status in the schooling-as-learning paradigm. The basis of many of the myths are rooted in the Cartesian view of a fixed reality and the unquestioned acceptance of a form of rational reductivism which views learning as a cause and effect process involving the transmission of fixed truths (Madison, 1988). In addition, various theories of learning continue to hold sway despite being of somewhat limited value. For example, the influence of Piaget's developmental stage theory is pervasive in the ways that educators think about learning and subsequently enact teaching practices. Graue and Walsh note that these influences continue despite a mounting body of research evidence that problematizes the application of the Piagetian model to student learning in classrooms. Graue and Walsh summarize the problem in this way

> For the most part, Piagetian descriptions have been of children in laboratory settings doing "novel, nonsignificant problems ... [requiring] coherent justification according to formal logic" (Hatano & Inagaki, 1986, p. 265). The Genevean school has ignored the influence of culture, as it has ignored the influence of what Donaldson (1978) called the child's "human sense," that meaningful understanding of the world the child has constructed through her culturally mediated experience with it. (pp. 2 - 3)

All of the problem clearly does not rest with Piaget; it is much more likely one of interpretation; however, such critiques certainly draw attention to and invite us to question how many accepted educational practices may be flawed in fundamental ways. As I have pointed out in previous discussions, many of the instructional practices that the students in the inquiry were subject to appeared to be theoretically sound, but it was ultimately each student's interpretation of, not only the practice, but the human, physical and emotional context in which it was personally situated, in essence, the "human sense," that determined whether the student benefited from the experience.

Weinstein (1989) conducted a series of research studies into the ways in which students' perceptions of learning affected their learning outcomes and she concluded that "First, what students perceive about teaching behavior may not in fact resemble either teacher intent or observed practice; and second, it is the students' perception-cognition that is ultimately the influential element on achievement" (p. 192). In other words, the way that students interpret the situation or context leads to the way that they think about similar situations in the future. These embedded ways of thinking may lead to clarity or confusion depending almost entirely upon how the students view themselves, the activity and their possibilities for successfully completing of the activity.

Overall, Weinstein's (1989) conclusion that children's perceptions act as a primary mediating influence in determining the extent of their achievement, both narrowly and broadly defined, was evident throughout my discussions with the students as well as in my observations of their activities and responses in the classroom. Weinstein found, as I did, that students' interpretations of how learning is supposed to proceed, the nature and extent of support that was available, and how they situated themselves as learners played a strong (and sometimes critical) role in determining their relative success (in its multiple definitions) as learners in the classroom. One of the conclusions that Weinstein drew was that "This (mediating) paradigm also underscores the importance of the student perspective rather then the observed classroom reality as the focus of study" (p. 192). I have provided examples of how the "observed classroom reality," such as occurred in the group interactions and the sequences of spelling instruction, did not indicate the true extent of how the students actually experienced the activities. It was most often the personal perspectives of the students that had a far stronger effect than the teacher's plans or intentions. I have also pointed out that the views of learning held by these particular students were more likely to be influenced by the interactions between the students than those between the students and their teacher. Weinstein also found that "Children's viewpoints also teach us that the teacher-student dyad is not the only unit of analysis for the transmission of expectancy effects. Instead, teacher treatment of peers is as salient a source of information as teacher treatment of self" (p. 216). For some of the low agency students, particularly Andy and Nadia, their perceptions of how to respond in the classroom were strongly influenced by how they saw the teacher interact with other students. My observations suggest that for the low agency students, it was their "human sense" of learning that led them to develop perspectives that were ill informed or, at best, only partially informed. Quite often, their learning proceeded according to incomplete theories of how they were supposed to go about tasks, and what the learning outcomes were supposed to constitute. The information they gathered from observing and interacting with their peers (and in part to their teacher's admonitions) indicated that, in order to be successful as learners in the classroom, all they had to do was to be compliant, follow the behavioral rules set by their teacher, listen well, work hard, and complete their assigned "work" in the allotted time. A major part of their frustration appeared to arise from the fact that they felt they were doing all of this and yet they continued to experience little or no success in the classroom.

In summary, the teacher's methods, procedures, classroom texts, and classroom management practices as I observed them appeared to be based on and supported by commonly held theories of how children learn and what counts as learning in schools. However, when the students interpreted these practices some critical distortions occurred (a common situation in many classrooms). Not only did the interpretive frameworks used by the students interfere with what they were "supposed" to be learning (the curriculum as presented by their teacher), they created serious side effects in terms of the how certain "low agency" students came to view themselves and their possibilities for future success both in school and beyond. Most often, these unintended outcomes manifested as a form of debilitating confusion and uncertainty. Unfortunately, in many ways this was iatrogenic in that it appeared to be directly related to the students' experiences with schooling.

Reflective Conclusion 2

> *When the purposes for learning are unclear and when learning appears to be trivial or irrelevant, students may experience confusion and tensions that interfere directly in their ability to learn.*

In Chapter 3, I reviewed research conducted by Hudson-Ross, Cleary and Casey (1993) who used phenomenological interviews to gain insights into how children thought about literacy instruction in school and their own processes. In addition to the fact that many students in their study "saw" learning from a different perspective than their teacher, a dominant theme that emerged from these interviews was that students often find school a place of confusion. When I listened to the students talk in my research inquiry this was also apparent. It needs to be acknowledged that without some "confusion" or disequilibrium there would be little learning (however defined). However, for some of the students, the confusion they experienced affected not only their view of learning but also, from a phenomenological perspective, their view of themselves, their personal efficacy, and their overall sense of personal agency. As one direct result, because they seldom were aware of how to proceed within the classroom activities, the low agency students viewed learning with apprehension that sometimes bordered on fear. In addition, learning was quite often simply incomprehensible. As I observed them responding and engaging in activities in class, I sensed that they felt that if they could just get the procedure right everything else would follow. In their minds, they appeared to be going through all the appropriate motions, they seemed to be doing what all the other students were doing, and yet they were experiencing little success. From the descriptions I have provided it appeared that the "low agency" students did not have a functional understanding of how the system worked, what its goals "for" them were, and how they could influence their own situations to make them more comprehensible. Eventually, the sheer weight of confusion experienced by the low agency students created a form of anomie. Their response was to repeat patterns of behaviour apparently in the hope that such repetition would eventually result in some form of learning. As Bowers so eloquently expresses it, "Phenomenologically, the individual undergoes an experience without deriving personal meaning from it. He experiences the surface only, as he allows his behavior to be dictated by the social role he is playing … or the routine he has performed in the past" (1974, p. 76).

Their teacher's frequent explanations and admonishments indicated to them that their failure to learn was rooted in their inability to pay attention, to listen. When the students found that close listening did not help them, they appeared to develop a set of strategies that allowed them to survive, and most of these involved masking their confusion by giving the appearance of engagement. Based on research that investigated students' understandings of learning in classrooms, Shulman and Carey (1984) concluded that students usually did whatever needed to be done as learning "but the strategies employed were not the ones intended by the teacher or the constructors of the curriculum" (p. 511). They also concluded that even though these strategies allowed students to get by in school, they were often "idiosyncratic and severely flawed" (p. 511). In my research, similar misunderstandings, incomplete, or misdirected personal patchwork theories, were commonplace, and they were most readily apparent in the views expressed by Nadia and Andy. However, in much more subtle and creative ways, Arthur had developed his own theories that allowed him to "get through" the day without drawing attention to the fact that he was seldom able to complete the majority of the assigned tasks, particularly those that required him to independently read and write. He inevitably relied heavily on support from his partner or group and he defined an ideal partner as someone "who knows how to go on computers 'cause we do lots of Internet, and he knows what to write and he knows the topic." After further prompting from me, he added, "Ah … uhmm … we would both know how to, like, spell different words, both of us know how to spell them and some she would know and some I would know how, and then the word we don't know we would help each other out." Arthur identified most of his learning problems with his inability to spell, maintaining steadfastly that he had not been taught by the right method. In fact, he maintained that the majority of students in Canada could not read and spell as a result of the early instruction they had received. Perhaps the following conversation, more than any other, provides the most poignant illustration of how the experiences students have with a prescribed curriculum may lead to a frustration that borders on despair.

> JP: How is your writing?
> Arthur: Good!
> JP: What's your biggest challenge?
> Arthur: Spelling.
> JP: What have you been doing about spelling?
> Arthur: Not much. I just been reading books that interest me.
> JP: Are you concerned about spelling?
> Arthur: Yah! In Grade 1 I say we should have been taught by sound instead of bunches 'cause bunches gets us confused and by sounds if we learn how to read instead of teacher helping us to read we can just pick up a book and read it like this! *You* [meaning JP] know how to sound and know how to spell!

JP: When you talk about reading by sounds …?

Arthur [Interrupts forcefully] Works better! Did *you* ever hear that most of the Canadian kids can't spell very well and most kids in Europe and Asia and the Continent can spell better than us 'cause they teach by sound?

JP: How did you find this out?

Arthur: If you look in the newspaper, kids that write in it, sometimes they get the spelling wrong and they could be the best speller in the school.

JP: But they're still not?

Arthur: Yah! They kids … some words they cannot spell!

JP: So, if you weren't taught and you aren't a good speller, is there anything you can do about it?

Arthur: Yah! Learn how to read by sounds, but I don't know how to read it.

JP: Did you ever get extra help?

Arthur: All the kids get help in this school. Back then [He is now referring to his understanding of how reading instruction proceeded in the past] even in U.S. and Canada they taught by sounds like my Mom and Dad, even *YOU!* Weren't *YOU* taught by sounds?

JP: Probably wasn't, but my mother was very interested in reading and writing … .

Arthur: [Interrupting vehemently] *Yah! BUT SHE WAS PROBABLY TAUGHT BY SOUNDS BECAUSE BACK THEN EVERYONE WAS TAUGHT BY SOUNDS UNTIL THEY CHANGE IT BY BUNCH.*

JP: I'm interested in this. Where does the information come from?

Arthur: Just people who were talking about it, and *IT'S ALSO TRUE* 'cause there's other kids, and my friend's mom, she used to write about books and she was taught how to read by sound and she couldn't read her cousin's sons in the Philippines and my mom's cousins are in Italy and they can read and spell better than us, even in English!

As I re-read this exchange I am struck once again with the power of Arthur's conviction (the italics do not capture how forcefully he confronted me with his ideas) and how totally convinced he was that he knew exactly where his learning problems lay. Unlike Nadia and Andy, Arthur not only knew he had a problem, but he was able to clearly articulate it (and, based on current "theoretical" notions of literacy learning, what he has to say does have a certain ring of authenticity about it). From his perspective, the instruction he was receiving was contrary to what he needed; yet, he had no choice but to take part in it. In other words, the methods and the various prescribed curricula that should have worked to help him to learn although they appeared to be theoretically sound were, in a practical sense, not useful to him. In response, Arthur had managed to contrive a number of compensatory strategies that allowed him to appear to be learning when all that was transpiring was that he was spending his day in the presence of various and sundry unrelated pieces of information. In some ways, he was the most "resilient" of all the students, for, despite the distortions and inappropriateness of his experiences in the classroom and his lack of skills, he still managed to use the teacher's structures and procedures as a means of survival. Unfortunately, it appears highly probable that once the "loophole in the system" (as Marion put it) is closed off, (and most of them predicted it would be in Junior High School), learning in school may well become impossible for a student like Arthur who, even though he may be the ultimate survivor, has developed few independent literacy skills, leaving him ill-equipped to deal with most of his school-based learning. One can only conjecture as to the directions that Arthur may turn his frustration.

Generally, Arthur and the low agency students in the study relied almost totally on the group procedures to support their survival in the classroom; however, the process was often undermined by the contradiction between ends and means. As I described in chapter 7, the students sometimes experienced a curriculum that was in many ways internally inconsistent. Behavioral theories of learning based on the notion that learning is a quantifiable, transmittable product that is controlled by and subject to the manipulation of external incentives were sometimes situated in contexts that required students to see learning from an entirely different perspective, one that presented learning as the development of negotiated and shared understandings which were to be arrived at through collaboration. Thus, their immediate concern with producing evidence of their individual learning inevitably generally appeared to take precedence over the teacher's admonition that they needed to work together and mutually support each other's learning. This finding is consistent with research conducted by Graue who found that even though young children engaged in a writing process in which their teacher encouraged "open expression and invented spelling in a supportive atmosphere," the students "focussed almost exclusively on spelling words correctly" (cited in Graue & Walsh, 1996, p. 149). In this instance the students ignored the intent and advice of their teacher and applied their notions of writing from the classroom phonics worksheets that emphasized correctness as the criterion for learning. Thus, based on their experiences, the students developed their own definition of what constituted adequate learning. The teacher presented contradictory messages and the students developed their own theories. As I have shown such contradiction was most obvious in the grouping practices that Mr. T. employed, and viewed from a distance, there are some steps he may have taken to ameliorate the situation.

In a general sense, peer interaction and supported group learning in classrooms is a basic premise of constructivist theory. However, such interactions often did not appear to generate a great deal of meaning for many of the students and one interpretation or explanation may be that Mr. T. presented group activities which confused collaboration with cooperation. Peters (1997) clearly makes the distinction between the two concepts:

> Collaboration ... means people laboring together with the intent of creating something. People engaged in collaborative learning are laboring together to produce knowledge. ... Cooperation means people working together to help each other out. Individual learning is the focus. ... Usually, in cooperative education, the teacher sets the agenda, tells the students what they are to learn, and the students work with one another in various ways to get the learning accomplished. (p. 67)

Such a distinction in the intended outcomes of their group activities might have made a difference in the way that the students approached their interactions in the groups. Another aspect of the group learning problem encountered by the students, as I have discussed previously, was that they were often left to their own devices as to how they were supposed to "work with each other" (It should be noted that the teacher may have spent considerable time explaining various roles, however, this did not occur when I was in the classroom). In such situations, their teacher may have considered providing more guidance as to roles and responsibilities. He could have monitored the levels and kinds of interaction that occurred, paying particular attention to those students who were marginalized (and even traumatized) by the process. In other words, perhaps he could have given equal attention to the "human effect" as he gave to his concern with the students' progress on the dimensions of learning around which the activity was centred.

There are any number of suggestions as to how teachers may factor in the "human effect" and how it may be facilitated in the classroom. For example, the situation that Nadia found traumatic might have been headed off by the use of sociograms that indicate the students who are most likely to be chosen as learning partners, who are isolates, and why students prefer certain groupings. The use of sociograms may help teachers in facilitating group and individual learning (Lemlech, 1998). In the study, it was apparent that Gerri usually preferred to work alone and there were some obvious personality conflicts within the class as a whole. In addition, the ways in which the high agency students subverted the group process was not overtly apparent and this may have been detected using sociometric devices that have potential to account for the changing patterns of interest and allegiances within the classroom. When the teacher is able to follow up systematically and periodically on the information gained from sociometric devices, it may indicate to the students that the teacher really cares about them. Lemlech notes "Frequent assessment of the learning environment communicates to the students that a teacher cares how students feel and has respect for them" (p. 211). For the majority of the students it was quite apparent that they were unsure of how the groups were formed (leading them to form their own incomplete theories). In Keith's estimation, "[Mr.T.] … sees how people work with each other … randomly … make you work with anyone and learn to get with it or live it!" Perhaps, a reasonable explanation of the rationale may have helped them to sort out the reasons for why they were doing an activity as well as why they were in a particular grouping pattern. If the teacher can let students know that he or she is seeking to form the most productive learning arrangements and that these arrangements are flexible, the students may feel more comfortable. When the underlying principle behind grouping is one of management and control, the building of productive learning relationship may be difficult and may cause the students to resent the other students in their group before they even start on a particular activity. For some of the students their talk about "hating" to work with some of their peers indicates that they had a less than conducive attitude to begin with. Once again, listening to the students' perspectives may have given the teacher some indication of the critical role that the students' "human sense" plays in any interactive situation.

Reflective Conclusion 3

> *The learning as work metaphor that flows through a great deal of educational thinking could be revisited in terms of the impact it has upon students' and teachers' views of learning.*

As discussed in Chapter 8, when learning is cast as "work" it usually represents for students something to be avoided, and if unavoidable, something to be completed expeditiously with the least effort possible. Viewed in this light, learning is something that is distinctly unenjoyable, unrewarding, and done only at someone else's pleasure and dictate. Children in school learn very early to distinguish between activities as being either work or play: play is considered anything that is freely chosen and work is anything prescribed by the teacher, even though this may involve the same activity (Klein et. al., 1988). In order for children to succeed at school tasks "hard work" is generally considered a requisite attribute, and a great deal of children's lack of achievement is credited to poor work habits. Wang and her colleagues (1993, 1996) concluded that "resilience" best describes the characteristics of those students who manage to combine hard work with a certain obstinacy in order eventually to succeed in school against the odds. This means that for many students, particularly those whose primary discourse is dissynchronous with the dominant school discourse, learning in school is seen primarily as a matter of overcoming adversity.

According to the resiliency thesis, it is essential that certain children develop characteristics of resiliency if they are to succeed in school. Such a contention ignores the obvious: What happens to children that causes them to lose these abilities in the first place? One has only to observe a group of kindergarten children as they engage in various centre activities to see children displaying high levels of continuous engagement, competence, verbal ability and openness. It is only after their introduction to and induction into the prescribed curriculum that their natural learning inclinations and proclivities are curtailed and diminished. What they experience as learning in school, by definition, directly undermines most of the "resiliency" characteristics they already have. For some children "school" means that:

- Active talk that normally accompanies most learning is replaced with controlled talk in contrived situations (Cazden, 1988).
- Self-initiated and sustained learning is replaced with teacher-initiated, time constrained activities (Bowers & Flinders, 1990).
- The immediate and obvious purposes for learning (inquiry, discovery and experimentation) are replaced with ill-defined, abstract and distant outcomes, epitomized in "achievement tests."
- Learning moves from being internally satisfying to something requiring external rewards and/or sanctions (Ames & Ames, 1989).
- Students move from self-sufficiency to learned helplessness (Allington & Walmsley, 1995).

Thus, as a direct result of their experiences with schooling certain vulnerable students lose their sense of personal efficacy, their ability to act upon the world, and, ultimately, their "self" control (Bowers, 1974; Jardine, 1988). Bowers provides a succinct summary of the dilemma that students may find themselves in as a result of their experiences in schools.

> The existential tension experienced when the student attempts to reconcile his inner world with the external realities of the social world would certainly be part of any phenomenological statement [one that describes the experience of school for the student]. One can cite the common experience of the student who is deeply involved in material and must stop because the bell has signaled the end of the period or the student who felt he got a great deal from a book or field trip but is told his learning experience is not really valid because he answered the teacher's questions poorly. There are other examples that occur in the daily lives of students that exact a toll on the existential self: the strange feeling that occurs when the student realizes that his success in the competitive arena of the classroom has been achieved at the expense of another student who is made to feel inferior, the uncertainty and uneasiness the student experiences when the teacher and the rest of the class voice their approval of a piece of literature he personally found uninteresting, to the experience of sitting hour after hour in a classroom maintaining the behaviors that suggest to the teacher interest and involvement but knowing inside that it is a façade. (pp. 22-23)

Unfortunately for students, the disjuncture between schooling and their life experiences and intuitive understandings is deemed almost necessary. For many parents, educators and politicians the notion that children need to give up their natural learning proclivities and to "work hard" in order to learn is firmly embedded in the notion of schooling. In fact, it is one of the accepted truisms of Western thinking that work is synonymous with reliability, diligence, and persistence, which are all seen as traits that serve individuals in the development of "productive" lives. Life, in this tradition, is essentially about overcoming obstacles and "bouncing back from reversal." Thus, in the school of life "resiliency" is seen as the key to survival. The connection between resiliency and learning in schools represents a new slant on the hidden curriculum, a curriculum which ultimately indicates to students that school may require them to encounter and overcome debilitating and dis-spiriting experiences so they will be prepared in some manner for what is to come in the "real world."

Rigsby (1994) in deconstructing the notion of resiliency points out that it is rooted in a folklore that is uniquely American. He explains that the major assumptions of this folklore are

> - everyone can and should strive to 'get ahead,' to improve their standing (it is left implicit that this will entail passing others, not improvement for everyone)
> - the arena of competition for getting ahead is open, fair and accessible to all (no structural impediments for groups defined by race, gender, culture, etc.)
> - the competition for getting ahead is structured like a continuing game in that there are few points of 'no return,' one can always get oneself together and reenter the competition
> - disadvantages that affect one's chances of success are individual and can be overcome with individual effort (p. 87).

From these assumptions emerge the attributes of the quintessential American folk hero, a lone individual who, despite all of the adversity life can throw in his or her path, is able through sheer "grit" to succeed in the world, and this success usually entails gaining material wealth and position (and the respect and admiration of his or her fellow citizens). Thus, the development of resilient graduates appeals to both the aspirations of people to improve their lot in life, while it simultaneously serves the economic and political needs of the prevailing economic system.

Ultimately, resilience entails the ability to bounce back after being misshapen. It also may mean "irrepressible liveliness and good spirit" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, (1999) [On-line] Available at http://www.m-w.com/netdict.htm) often in the face of uncomfortable or demeaning circumstances. Thus, inherent in the claim that students need to develop resilience is the acknowledgement that learning in school inevitably represents an unpleasant and somewhat mis-shaping experience for certain students, and this may be particularly true for those who come from groups which are already marginalized in society (Delpit, 1993; Giroux, 1983; Ogbu, 1991). Basically this "no pain, no gain" view depicts learning as an endurance test, as the "prize" in a competition that often pits teacher against students and students against each other. Learning in school is cast as adversarial, something that students need to suffer through and eventually overcome. Only the best and the resilient survive; the rest have only themselves to blame for their "failure" in school, for, hypothetically, all students have equal opportunity to learn. Although such conceptualizations may be rationalized in terms of the way they prepare students for the world of work, in reality, the "costs" may eventually prove to be prohibitive.

Reflective Conclusion 4

> *Teachers are often aware of the impact that the contradictory demands of school have upon their students, and, consequently, they also experience schooling as frustrating.*

In this thesis I have assumed a somewhat critical stance, one which calls into question the assumption that education "works". I have given minimal acknowledgement to what does work and thus the thesis runs the risk of being considered overly negative and critical. On balance, I need to acknowledge that for many children schooling represents an opportunity to move out from harsh and debilitating situations, while for some it represents a protective haven from the rigors and mistreatment they may experience in the world at large. I also acknowledge that for some children each day brings eminently rewarding and fulfilling learning experiences. Many children do not lose the wonder of learning and the joy of school experiences, and some form lifelong bonds and associations with their teachers that move them constantly to strive and achieve in all areas of their lives. From this perspective, it was readily apparent that the school community within which I conducted my inquiry made strenuous and concerted efforts to make the students' time in school a worthwhile experience. The teachers tirelessly volunteered their time and efforts to enhance the quality of life for their "inner-city" students. They were active with breakfast programs, clothing exchanges, fund-raising, after school clubs, and field trips, and considerable time was spent preparing, organizing and implementing extracurricular activities for the students. Parent and community participation was encouraged, particularly as they supported literacy initiatives, and the principal and staff actively sought out ways that the community at large could be called upon and invited to support the school's programs. The students' art, writing, and other learning projects were prominently displayed throughout the school and the staff developed numerous ways to recognize and celebrate the achievements of the students. The benefits that accrued to the students from these activities cannot be discounted.

It was, however, the external demands placed upon the school, the school's principal, and the teachers that furnished the primary messages that the students incorporated into their perceptions of learning and how it occurred. As I have pointed out, for the Grade 6 students the most potent force in their learning were the ubiquitous Provincial Achievement Tests. Based on his interviews with principals of inner-city schools, Maynes (1990) reported that the negative influences of "some of the expectations ingrained in the traditional structures of schooling are such that they condemn poor children to failure. *Mandated programs of standardized testing were identified as a structural aspect of schooling bearing those expectations and reinforcing the sense of failure experienced by many poor children*" (p. 126, *emphasis added*). In addition, teachers whose inner-city students' achievement was being compared with the performance of middle-class students via "mandatory testing programs" (p. 121) saw these tests as having a negative impact on students. Maynes points out "… even though students may have been making fine progress in school, the results of standardized tests gave them negative messages about their abilities as learners" (p. 121). He further reports that principals of "inner-city" schools felt that "Some teachers became 'exhausted' or 'emotionally drained' [while] … others began to show less concern for some of the difficult children, treating them with 'detached concern'" (p. 125). In certain ways, for the low agency students in Mr. T.'s class it was more a case of "benign" concern, and as I have shown, quite often his efforts to support and protect them only contributed further to their sense of helplessness. [illegible] a sense, the students derived much of the substance of their perspectives on learning and its value from the interactions and meta-messages that they encountered within the classroom. Bowers and Flinders (1990) note how extensive such influences are when they write

> From the meta messages of the classroom students also learn what it means to learn, the norms of school life, what forms of knowledge are regarded as legitimate, differences between home and school, the nature of thinking and feeling, the value of competition, what it means to be an individual, and so on. … Such implicit lessons represent various strands in an intricate web of meaning, each held in place not by messages transmitted from sender (teacher) to receiver (students) but through the ecology of language that characterizes the classroom. (p. 204)

How can teachers reconcile the external political press to increase their students' academic achievement with their personal sense that the prescriptive curriculum presents to students a learning perspective that can be somewhat debilitating? There are no ready answers or quick fix solutions (Allington & Walmsley, 1995). One step may be to restore some form of ecological "balance", one that starts with the recognition that each student is an active interpreter of not only his or her life in the classroom, but also of the total process of schooling. Some of the ways that a "balance" may be restored are already extant and appear consistently in the findings of interpretive and phenomenological research. They may, however, be worth revisiting.

It is apparent that students benefit when the content of what they are required to learn is connected in meaningful ways with their various personal, social and cultural discourses (Cummins, 1993; Delpit, 1988; Knapp & Associates, 1995; Ogbu, 1978; Leroy, 1995). One of the conclusions reached by Leroy (1995) in her study of children's oppositional behaviours in school was that there is a very real need for student learning to be tied "more closely for the children to life outside of school" (p. 202). In essence, this means that *this* child is acknowledged as bringing a special and unique discourse to every situation. In addition, students may benefit when teachers find ways in which the various roles that students need to assume in interactive and individual learning situations can be orchestrated to maximize the opportunities for all students to develop their learning capabilities (Johnson & Johnson, 1991; Lemlech, 1998). Finally, as a way of helping students expand their interpretive frameworks, teachers may consider strategies that help students to become aware of why they are engaging in learning activities, and how their personal learning processes can be made more apparent. As part of this perspective, teachers could consider maximizing the opportunities students have to assume personal responsibility for their learning (and to consider the ways in which their talk and action and the classroom situations and structures promote and maintain learned helplessness). Similarly, if individual accountability is seen as desirable and necessary, then students may need to be taught the skills and dispositions necessary for independent learning (Langer, 1997; Strahan, 1997).

Based on my experiences with the students in the inquiry it was apparent that teachers need to balance curriculum concerns with the overall well being of each student in an overt and conscious manner. Leroy (1995) discusses the need for children to "have access to individual support on an individual basis" and she suggests that there are specific teacher practices that could facilitate this support. These include "a consistently enforced system of signaling for attention, through setting up appointments to meet with individuals, and through using the dialogue journal specifically for private letter writing with the teacher" (p. 198). One of the implicit conclusions that Leroy reached was that students' perceptions of learning are driven primarily by the nature of the understandings that develop between the students and their teacher. Essentially, learning is seen as fundamentally a process of interpretation that is situated in the ecology of interpersonal awareness that evolves in the classroom. This being the case, the establishment of lines of communication, both formal and informal appears to be the most obvious first step in setting up the classroom as an interpretive community. The students in my inquiry felt that they asked their teacher for help, but my observations indicated that they seldom did; they seldom "talked" with their teacher, and it was apparent that they felt that they had few channels by which informal and personal communication could occur. It seems self-evident that a teacher's understanding of his or her students is only partially informed by observation, check lists, inventories and by sampling their "work". If there is only one recommendation to be made from this research it would be to stress the value of regularly scheduled formal and informal conversations with students. As Kvale (1996) succinctly states "If you want to know how people understand their world and their life, why not talk with them" (p. 10)? Perhaps, the following student views provide the most compelling reasons for teachers to regularly talk with each of their students.

JP: Would it be useful for teachers to talk with you?
Jonathon: Like, yeah! If teachers talk to you, they might know what we'd be good at even if it's our choice. What we want to become, like, they could tell us what we might look forward to ... as a scientist or police.

JP: What did you get out of this (talking with me)?
Lina: Yeah, telling somebody what you do in school and telling how you feel and stuff like that!

JP: Was it useful to talk with me?
Nadia: I don't know.

Reflective Conclusion 5

> ***When the well-being of each student-as-child becomes the central curriculum focus in schools many short and long-term problems may be avoided.***

JP: Nadia, what do you think [about learning being a competition]?
Nadia: I don't know, because I am behind in class and people make fun of me for being slow, and I just want to be ready for the next activity and try to catch up.

One of the agendas of interpretive research with children is to present the meaning(s) that they bring to and derive from their experiences as students, to alert educators that school is not just about children, it is *for* children. According to Thorne who conducted phenomenological research into children's experiences with isolation in school, "One of my goals is to help bring children from the margins and into the center of sociological and feminist thought" (1993, p. 4). One of the goals of this account is to illustrate how educators may move further in this direction. If children cannot for various political reasons become the central concern of schooling, then hopefully they can be moved in from the margins and the periphery, so that they become the critical reference points for educational discussion. By this I mean that those engaged in thinking about education need to move from viewing children as an amorphous educational variable to kids who are sentient people in their own right; from a certain insensitivity that measures student learning in terms of test scores and statistical averages to a much more humane and enlightened view that sees children as individuals trying to sort out and make sense of an often confusing tableau of conflicting adultcentric notions of what learning should be. In the most optimistic scenario, this entails viewing children as people who live in real worlds, who experience life in all of its multiple varieties and facets and whose perspectives play a critical role in whether or not school represents a rewarding and worthwhile experience (Corsaro, 1997; Graue & Walsh, 1998; Ellis, 1998).

From a number of perspectives, the value of research that involves children as direct participants may lie in the acknowledgement that each child is an active interpretive inquirer. Such a realization calls into question many of the conclusions from research that depicts students as the objects of experimental procedures, whose sex, age, race, socio-economic background can be "controlled" in order to determine the effects of various procedures, methods, applications, and treatments. Such research has attempted to understand and describe children-in-school based on observations and measurement of their responses and reactions to contrived learning situations. Jardine (1988) suggests that such research has done very little to further our understanding of what it means to be a child in school, and he puts forward the common sense notion that we already have an eminently practical understanding of children without having to resort to theoretical explanations and descriptions of what it means to be a child. He suggests that this is the "sphere of practical understanding, the sphere of living our lives together with children and thoughtfully asking after what is best for them and for us, deciding, in the midst of an almost overwhelming plethora of possible *technical* courses of action which are open to us, what should we do" (p. 185, *emphasis added*). I have suggested that many of the classroom strategies employed by Mr. T. were technically sound, and were usually based upon and derived from current theories of how children learn. At the same time, I have suggested that sometimes they not only did not "work", but that they may have contributed to counter-productive outcomes. This paradox may have been the unavoidable result of the teacher's need to place his primary teaching emphasis on helping his students to achieve the prescribed curriculum outcomes, a process that I have depicted as a trivialization of learning. However, there is an alternative perspective. When life and learning in classrooms are viewed from a particular child's perspective, the teacher may retain his or her instructional practices, but they may now work in entirely different ways for students and the teacher. Max van Manen (1993) maintains that thoughtful pedagogical practice starts with the child and not with the method or technique. He writes, "Educational understanding is based on an understanding of how a child experiences the curriculum, … [and that] … Educational understanding becomes pedagogical understanding only when it is oriented towards working out what it means for *this* child to be and become an educated person in his or her evolving life" (p. 93 *emphasis added*). Perhaps, the significance of the need to focus on a particular child at a particular time may have been considered a shortcoming in traditional large scale experimental research, but listening to the voices of each student in this research has revealed that it is only through such a focus that schooling can become meaningful (both personally and socially) for every child. Although educators have long given up the somewhat elusive goal of "individualizing the curriculum," there still remains a potent and rewarding need to personalize the daily encounters, of all kinds, that student have within the classroom. Jardine (1988) summarizes this idea succinctly.

> This, in essence, constitutes a hermeneutic understanding of the commonplace, "there are children all around us." The obviousness of this commonplace poses the question of what it means for us to live in a world in which children are a potent presence in our lives. And, in the sphere of education, we find we must live with the question of what it is we wish to bring forth in children and how

> we should proceed in doing this. And we find, inevitably, that no learned or mastered technique can spare us the task of deliberation and decision. (p. 185)

One of these embedded ways of thinking, the habitus, is that because we have been children we know what's best for "them". This amorphous "them" is then situated in something called "childhood", which is seen as a condition that children must go through and eventually grow out of. Jardine, (1988), suggests that eventually "[Childhood] … is reconstructed into a technical term which refers to a univocal object domain to which only the theorist, practiced in the art of estrangement, can have proper access" (p. 180). In some ways, it is the notion of estrangement that can make education somewhat sterile and unresponsive to students. Although teachers' thinking may be dedicated to caring about their students as people, their actions may indicate a stronger concern with improving "student achievement" in the abstract forms most usually associated with learning in schools. An emphasis on *this* child does not entail an individualized curriculum (although this is certainly a possibility); what it means essentially is that each student is acknowledged, affirmed and is subject to appropriate forms of approval within his or her daily classroom routines and experiences. When I asked the students about their best memory of their schooling, they inevitably recalled occasions when they had been acknowledged as being special, and the recognition ceremonies at the weekly school accolade meetings were eagerly anticipated by all of the students. Nadia felt that if she could get one good mark her teacher would recognize her, and Gerri's epiphanic moment came when she was recognized as the star of the Shakespeare play. To a certain extent, every aspect of schooling, including academic achievement follows from students seeing themselves as valued and worthwhile. In one respect, affirmation is not about helping students to "feel good" about themselves (although this will be one outcome); rather it is about providing opportunities for each student to develop a sense of who he or she is, developing a sense of personal response-ability in the broadest sense of the word. Noddings (1995) sees this as developing within students an ethic of care for self, for others, for their environment, and for ideas. Such self-sustaining thinking enables children as individuals and members of community to position themselves in ways that are contributory. In short, a learning theory that maintains personal and social responsibility at its core may contribute to the development of individuals who are capable and willing to engage with the very real personal, local and global challenges both current and emerging with which we are faced. It is interesting to note that I started out this inquiry with the intention of looking into how a somewhat amorphous group of "students" understand learning, and I ended up really looking into how *this* child experiences learning. Based on my experiences with each of these students, I have come to the conclusion that there are few universal experiences of learning and that how *this* child experiences and understands learning is very much a result of how he or she thinks about him- or her-self.

Identifying the Contradictions

One of the conclusions that may be drawn from this research is that the "goals" of education which admonish educators to direct their energies toward the development of self-directed, intellectually curious, and self-sustaining individuals who "develop a sense of purpose in life and ethical or spiritual values which respect the worth of the individual" (Alberta Education, 1989, p. vii) are often directly and explicitly contravened by the demands of prescriptive curricula, external accountability measures, and political agendas. Efforts to "transform schools" are still being cast as the need to make "public education systems more responsive to the changing economic, demographic, political and social climate" (Procinsky, 2000), to find a set of best practices that will enable society to achieve its goals of education. What is overlooked is the fact that "systems" and "schools" cannot respond to anything. It is the people in the schools, and in particular the students, who need to develop response-abilities if schools are to be transformed. For the students in this study the dominant metaphors of learning as work, and as a competition in which only winners are rewarded, served in many ways to discourage their engagement in and with learning. Eventually the question must be asked as to the extent that the various problems and trauma that students associate with their learning in school are destined to appear in their personal and communal lives. These "effects", though highly speculative, can be anticipated, and such speculation is important in that it may bring to light the extent and depth of the real problems that accrue when schools do not work! As I have suggested, the problems encountered by some students are essentially iatrogenic in that the situation produces them in the first place. They result in part from the fact that "There are ... few advocates in the community who try to conceptualize the kind of educational experience the student needs if he is to develop as a mature and reasonably healthy adult" (Bowers, 1974, p. 136). Thus, although there are conflicting opinions as to the goals of schooling, there appears to be a certain imperative to set out the ways in which schooling can be related more specifically to the capabilities students need to live responsible, self-fulfilling, and sustaining lives.

Estimating the Costs

The conclusions that I have put forward centre principally on the debilitating effects of schooling experienced by some of the students and they must be read against the acknowledgement that for most children a "normal" childhood means that they experience the usual gamut of stresses, confusions, and traumas that are associated with simply being alive. In the long run most emerge relatively unscathed to lead personally fulfilling lives. In fact, there are indications that the overcoming of childhood trauma may eventually lead to later success in life (Pelletier, 1996). In a long-term interpretive study of men and women in the United States who were viewed as being eminently successful, in terms of both their personal and professional lives, Pelletier found that childhood trauma was quite common, and many of the individuals in the study felt that they were somehow strengthened by their experiences. Kirova-Petrova (2000) suggests that children who experience "loneliness" and isolation in school often emerge stronger as a result of their experiences. Based on her research that presented a phenomenological perspective on children's experiences with loneliness in schools, she notes

> [The] experience of loneliness expands their [children's] awareness and sensitivity towards the world, others, and themselves. Perhaps in the experience of loneliness children realize their need to be of worth to someone else. But not to be of worth to just anybody. Children, like adults, want to be of value to concrete other persons who have a particular worth for them. (p. 7).

In contrast Fine (1987) found that there may be hidden costs to the development of resilience as a response to the adversity represented by school experiences. She found that a group of black students "who were 'successes'—those who remained in school—when compared to dropouts, were significantly more depressed, less politically aware, less likely to be assertive in the classroom if they were ungraded, and more conformist" (1987, p. 163). In this instance, it appears that the students' survival in school may be more a matter of learned compliance rather than of the development of resilience.

Fine (1987) notes that there exists in many educational settings a refusal to confront the fact that schooling is not working for many students and groups of students. She calls this "silencing" and notes that "Silencing constitutes the process by which contradictory evidence, ideologies, and experiences find themselves buried, camouflaged, and discredited" (p. 157). She particularly points to the ways in which "… silencing diverts critique away from the economic, social, and educational institutions which organize class, race, and gender hierarchies" (p. 158). It is also apparent that silencing serves to divert attention away from the critical ways that education does not work in the interests of many students. One of the critical costs of this lack of interest may lie in the extent to which students are dis-spirited and lose their sense of self. They learn that success in school depends not on the development of resilience, but on subservience and compliance. One of the costs of this compliance, as Guthrie (1996) points out, is that "When children read merely to complete an assignment, with no sense of involvement or curiosity, they are being compliant. They conform to the demands of the situation irrespective of their personal goals. Compliant readers are not likely to become lifelong readers" (p. 433). As I have pointed out in the course of this thesis, compliant learners lose not only their sense of direction, but also, perhaps more importantly their sense of choice and control. In a broader context, Bowers writing in 1974, observes

> The [teacher's] view of reality becomes part of the communication process in the classroom and thus establishes the parameters for how the student is to perceive reality when he is in that environment. What is legitimized as being real will conform to the technological world view: an emphasis on efficiency, quantifying behavior, objectifying experience, and predicting and controlling the future. Values, inner feelings, and modes of perception not in conformity with the technological view of reality will be omitted from the environment and thus tacitly de-legitimized for the student as viable alternative ways of looking at the world. [Thus, students] … can learn to discount other aspects of experience—the sense of mystery and awe, creative human expressions that cannot be predicted or controlled, the feelings of responsibility and integrity, the sense of personal joy and celebration, as they cannot be quantified. (p. 170)

Learning in such contexts is necessarily coercive. In order for teachers to insure compliance, incentives for learning must be in place and they are most often "teacher-driven, program-driven, or assignment-driven (and) include recognition, reward, competition and grades" (Guthrie, 1996, p. 433). In addition, students may be subjected to what Bowers (1974) terms "humiliation ceremonies (group pressure, low grades, trip to the principal's office, expulsion, the demeaning comments) …" (p. 24). The mistaken behavioral belief is that students are "motivated" by such incentives, but motivation is essentially a state of anticipation of which the critical elements are those of choice and control. As Bowers points out, for many students compliance entails the relinquishing of a personal control and its replacement with the externally determined productivity notions of learning with which they are presented on a daily basis. In the process, some students lose their sense of personal agency to such a degree that they also lose their voices and their sense of self-worth. They are disempowered as individuals. Cummins (1989) supports this contention when he states that "… students from "non-dominant" power groups are 'empowered' or 'disabled' as a direct result of their interaction with educators in schools. These interactions are mediated by the implicit and explicit role definitions that educators assume in relation to the four institutional characteristics of schools" (p. 58). One of the critical institutional characteristics of schools is a "… pedagogy [that] promotes intrinsic motivation on the part of the students to use language actively in order to generate their own knowledge." He concludes "For each of these dimensions of school organization the role of educators can be described in terms of a continuum, with one end promoting the empowerment of students and the other contributing to the disabling of students" (p. 58). For all of the students in this inquiry, it was apparent that the pedagogy to which they were subjected did not promote a high degree of intrinsic motivation. In fact, just the opposite appeared to be true. For the low agency students, the demands placed upon them by the school situation, however relevant, valid, or necessary they may have appeared from the perspective of the prescribed curriculum, seemed overwhelming, and the more external "motivation" they were subject to, the more disabled they appeared to become. In contrast, the high agency students had developed compliance strategies for working within the system that were sometimes of questionable value. Avoidance, subterfuge, masking, acting, and generally "working the system" to their personal advantage without regard for others appeared to be their primary means of complying with the system. Klein, Kantor and Fernie (1988) suggest that such "compliance" begins early in school and they cite research by Corsaro who observed kindergarten children as they were required by their teacher to engage in the "obligatory, teacher-controlled clean-up time." These students

> … developed a range of strategies to evade clean up time: moving to a new area after the cleanup announcement, pretending not to hear it, or coming up with personal problems that demanded their immediate attention. This "working the system" in their daily lives tell us more about children's ideas about work than their interview responses can tell us. (p. 36)

Although these behaviours may be regarded as inconsequential (and in some ways cute), for the students in my research inquiry, such avoidances of learning-as-work did not contribute positively to their view of learning or to themselves as persons. For in the long run we must ask *"Are these the attitudes* [principally avoidance] *we want them* [students] *to have about learning for the rest of their lives"* (Klein et al., p. 36, *emphasis added*)? It needs to be emphasized that much more is involved than students simply developing a distorted view of learning. A far greater concern may lie in the disabling and continuously degenerating ways in which some of the students had begun to view themselves. Guthrie (1996) has concluded that

> The crisis of youth in the USA is not primarily a literacy problem. It is a failure of self-actualization. In the inner cities more than half of the single 16-year-old females have borne at least one child. Interviews with these young women show they feel helpless. They do not believe that they can make decisions, form goals, or take charge of their lives. The world is coming at them. Things happen to them, and they don't have any control over them. (p. 435)

One can project with reasonable assurance that the self-actualization crisis experienced by these students may have some of its genesis in the overwhelming confusion produced by their experiences in school. As I have shown there are many sources of such confusion for students, including their inability to divine the purpose for learning, a failure to understand the procedures required to learn, trivialized notions of what is considered worthwhile as learning, and conflicting and contradictory messages about the nature of learning itself. Eventually inauthentic notions of where the locus of control for learning is situated arise. The situation demonstrates to the student that learning is defined as products whose quality is subject to external criteria. He or she learns to doubt, and subsequently begins to distrust, his or her personal intuitions and instincts. Situated daily within such confusion, the student learns to mistrust him or herself and the only defence is to surrender personal control. One can only conjecture where such passivity will lead, and it is with a certain trepidation that I present one possible direction.

A recent on-line article produced for the University of Alberta points out that "World Health Organization predicts that within a decade, depression [the 'invisible disease'] will become the second-ranked disease in terms of the burden it will put on society" (Thurber, 2000). Thus, it is the effect of debilitating school experiences on students' long term health and well being that becomes a focal concern. Dr. Kenneth Pelletier, who has conducted extensive research into the factors that contribute to healthy living, defines "true optimal health as an ongoing process in which we exercise personal choice throughout every stage of our lives." [He continues] "Positive emotions play a comprehensive role in promoting health in general, and these include: love, hope, faith, will to live, determination, festivity, laughter, which are all "powerful antagonists of depression" (1994, p. 29). Although his major focus is on pointing out the staggering costs of often unnecessary medical interventions, his major theme relates to the idea that many physical ailments are related directly to the way we think about health and the damage that occurs when we disregard the conditions that produce many preventable diseases, such as heart attacks and cancer. While I am cognizant of the problems inherent in medical analogies, it is apparent that a similar charge may be made about the way schooling induces and perpetuates many of the problems students have with learning.

A Response: Mindful Teaching and Learning

The pedagogical notions and suggestions for teaching and learning that I have embedded in my discussion are, in the main, not particularly new. It is perhaps the goal toward which they are dedicated that may be considered somewhat novel. Contained within them is the suggestion that the essential purpose for schools (what schools should be actively "working" toward and for) is the development of individuals who are existentially aware of who they are, who "know" that their lives are embedded in a universal ecology of mind and spirit, and who are aware of their personal roles and responsibilities within the global community. In addition, I suggest that attempts to come to grips with some of the more debilitating aspects of schooling may profitably originate within this notion. As Langer (1997) points out

> We can change school curricula, change standards for testing students and teachers, increase parent and community involvement in the process of education, and increase the budget for education so that more students become part of the computer age. *None of these measures alone will make enough difference unless students are given the opportunity to learn more mindfully.* With such opportunity, some of these expensive measures might well become unnecessary. (pp. 2-3, *emphasis added*)

Langer suggests, among other things, that when students are mindfully learning they are consciously aware of the active roles they play in their own learning, they are able to operate from a perspective of personal control, they are open to new perspectives (and anticipate them), and they are able to account for and handle multiple perspectives. In essence, they are individuals who are "imbued … with a sense of coherence. They manage to believe that *life* makes sense, that they have control over their fate and that God helps those who help themselves" (Pelletier, 1994, p. 41, *original emphasis*). Max van Manen echoes a similar perspective when he contends

> The modern child must realize that he or she is born into a condition of possibilities. He or she is this body of possibilities. To become a person, to grow up and become educated, is to transform one's contingency into commitment, responsibility—one must choose a life. This means that the vocation of pedagogy, of being educationally involved with children, is to empower children to give active shape to their contingencies. (1993, p. 3)

The kind of pedagogical thoughtfulness that van Manen speaks of is founded substantially on the notion that children must retain control of their own learning and the way they do this has very little to do with the actual activities they engage in, and a great deal to do with the way they think about themselves and their roles as learners as members of a learning community. In this conception, teaching and learning are considered to be mindful endeavors (Thornton & McEntee, 1995). Mindful teaching and learning fits in with a pedagogical tradition of thoughtfulness (Pearson, 1996), tact (van Manen, 1993), and reflective practice (Schön, 1987). Research into mindfulness suggests teaching actions that have as their prime consideration the student as person-learner. Teachers in schools and classrooms where mindful learning is valued and emphasized choose as their "… primary pedagogy, an active engaging of critical inquiry by all the participants in the learning environment" (Thornton & McEntee, 1995, p. 251). As the Buddhist teacher, Jon Kabat-Zinn terms it, "Mindfulness is … the direct opposite of taking life for granted … the very opposite of routine" (1994, p. 5). It is really all about developing and expanding each child's personal awareness and responsibility.

Mindful approaches to teaching and learning place equal responsibility on teacher and students. Such approaches inevitably engage teacher and learners in the scrutiny of actions and assumptions that tend to promote mindlessness, the investigation of ways that these practices can be diminished, and the ways that they can be replaced with actions that emphasize and promote independent responsibility for learning. Students who develop and display the characteristics of "low agency" are particularly susceptible to mindless thinking and acting as well as being vulnerable to "mindless" teaching practices. But they were not alone in this respect. The indications from the inquiry were that almost all of the students regarded learning from a somewhat mindless perspective (bearing in mind that this term is not used pejoratively here, but as a distinction from the mindful notions previously discussed). Based on my observations and our conversations, there was little to indicate that the students in my inquiry saw any of their learning as conditional or subject to re-examination. In most cases, they felt that they either could or couldn't "do" an entire activity and even "subject" (e.g. math), an opinion that was usually reflected directly in their performance (Schoenfeld, 1989). In addition, they generally equated learning with compliance, with conscientious listening, with silence (no talking) and good behaviour (no fooling around). In essence, they mainly saw learning in school as a set of appropriate behaviours to be developed, and procedures to be followed.

Conclusion

> ... freedom is meaningful as a word when it is associated with the individual's consciousness of everyday life. (Bowers, 1974, p. 73)

If nothing more, this research reveals that listening to how students experience learning in all of its variant forms and how they interpret the activities, interactions and demonstrations that accompany learning in school can be a powerful informant for educational researchers and practitioners. When the teaching focus moves from the academic achievement of an amorphous and anonymous group of "students" to *this* child as an active interpretive inquirer, educators at all levels may begin to consider what really is occurring in classrooms under the aegis of education. In addition, this research may indicate that traditional research efforts that generally have attempted to solve or fix school problems with their inward focus on the teacher, the school, and the system may have been focused to heavily in one direction. The particular "failure" of schooling that I have presented rests on the fact that learning is generally "situated" in contexts and considerations that are almost exclusively economic, social, and political. The result of such a focus has been the development of a somewhat hegemonic, myopic, and adultcentric view of how schools "should affect" children and subsequently, the contribution that schooling should make to the common good of the particular society in which it is situated. One of my conclusions is that, under the present regime, as children strive to fit into a product oriented system of learning, they are rendered in many ways "mindless" particularly in the way they think about themselves and in the ways that they consider their possibilities for becoming self-actualized individuals. Caine and Caine (1991) summarize this position when they state

> One function of schooling should be to prepare students for the real world. They need to have a sense of what will be expected of them, how they will be challenged, and what they are capable of doing. The assumption is that, by and large, schooling as we know it meets these goals. The reality is that it does not. On the contrary, it fosters illusions and obscures the real challenges. (pp. 16-17)

From a research perspective, this inquiry suggests a strong and deliberate need for the findings of educational research to go beyond traditional deconstructive urges to take apart and examine classroom practice and teacher methods, to point out faults and drawbacks and points of erosion, to attach blame and to ultimately draw implications and suggest solutions for all the problems that plague schools. In focussing on the ways in which the parts of the system work and don't work and how they may be "fixed", educators are often led to ignore (or deny) the problem in its entirety. Critical hermeneutics entails an active attempt to make sense of the whole system within which the meanings of not only children's personal experiences with schooling, but also the social meanings and collective interpretations that humankind attach to such experiences. As a result of such scrutiny, an emerging perspective may be that attempting to improve students' "academic achievement" must be considered as dependent upon the ways in which schooling supports the transcendent impulse for self-actualization in each and every student.

This inquiry also suggests that it is possible to view learning as the exploration and incremental realization of the possible, and that each student's possibilities are contingent upon the attainment of worthwhile goals, of which academic achievement may be considered necessary and rewarding. This conclusion implies that teachers in schools and those that develop and control the systems in which they are situated need to attend more closely to the whole child, cognitively, emotionally and spiritually. In our drive to produce graduates who are economic commodities, it may well be that schools are producing dis-abled individuals who are just as likely to become economic liabilities. Ultimately, if we wish schooling to contribute to the common good, we will need to start with *this* child and a determination of how the possibilities of each particular child can be moved toward realization. Certainly the valuable perspective proposed by critical theorists who see the primary goal of education as being the emancipation of the individual and the elimination of injustice and inequality is admirable and worthwhile (Edelsky, 1994). Unfortunately, when the daily lived experiences of children in school indicate that injustice and inequality are necessary if they are to survive within the system, there would appear to be little motivation for children to develop personal perspectives rooted in compassion and empathetic consideration for others, inclinations that form the foundations of a just society. Ultimately, real transformation begins with personal decisions made by the individual. This may demand what Robert Thurman (1998) terms "an inner revolution," which starts with each individual's conscious decision to take active control of his or her life. Thurman depicts personal responsibility as an essential and foundational starting point for societal renewal. He points out,

> The modern human rights tradition does not address the issue of individual responsibility. It focuses instead on how to restrain governments in their oppressive uses of power. The one sure way to secure individual rights in the long run is through the development of an ethic that internally motivates the individuals in societies where flagrant violations occur to take responsibility for respecting one another's rights. That internal ethic is what drives the politics of enlightenment. (p. 139)

An enriched form of critical literacy may be profitably directed toward the development of a new generation of "enlightened" students who will be able to practice justice and eliminate inequality in their communities simply because they have experienced them at all stages of their education, including that which occurs in schools. It is not resilience that is needed, although we want and need resilient people, it is people who are capable and assured in their lives and whose actions are derived from a set of ethical principles that are underwritten by awareness that each person bears some responsibility for every situation, dilemma, and problem; and, as such each is part of the solution. When we teach students to embrace care and compassion in pragmatic ways, they may ask questions of curriculum content and engage in quests that are of a profoundly different variety than those that narrow learning down to the ability to answer (or guess at the answer to) multiple choice questions or write stories. It is possible to help students to develop as independent learners who are capable of dealing with the interdependent challenges that they face as community members at every level, but this can occur only if students are allowed to retain their personal dignity and their existential sense of who they are. As Bowers (1974) points out when the children are systematically denied control of their personal destiny, they eventually come to believe that they have no choice in their lives.

Such an ecological perspective invites teachers to approach teaching from a mindful perspective. Davis, Sumara and Luce-Kapler (in press) make this point succinctly when they state

> Learning to teach and transforming one's teaching practices, then, are not simple matters of deliberately selecting and enacting particular pedagogical strategies. They are, rather, complex matters of embodying different habits of perception, of speaking, of theorizing, and of acting. (p. 23)

In the main, such "habits of perception" situate learning not only in curriculum documents and achievement testing programs, but in active complex encounters with children and their worlds. Teaching may continue to retain many conventional classroom practices and procedures, but the teacher teaches from a perspective that views students as active interpreters rather than as passive consumers. The narrow and constricting view of learning as academic and the goal of schooling as economic would necessarily be expanded to take into account the psychological and emotional health of not only each individual student, but the community at large as well.

Final Thoughts

In the opening chapter of their book *Life 101*, which they entitle "Introduction to Life," John-Roger and McWilliams (1991) claim:

> After twelve (or more) years of schooling, we know how to figure the square root of an isosceles triangle, but we might not know how to forgive ourselves and others (and the value of that).
> We know what direction migrating birds fly in autumn, but we're not sure which way we want to go.
> We have dissected a frog, but perhaps have never explored the dynamics of human relationships.

> We know what pi is, but we're not sure who we are.
> We may know how to diagram a sentence, but we may not know how to love ourselves.
> That our educational system is not designed to teach us the "secrets of life" is no secret. *In school, we learn how to do everything—except how to live.*
> (p. 3, *emphasis added*)

In a sense, this thesis provides some support for the contention that students in school are not really learning how to live, and it adds a more sobering thought. For some children the "everything" that they learn in school may include debilitating and disabling notions about themselves and their possibilities. The "everything" may also include notions about learning that are in many ways counterproductive. The results for the students who develop these notions may culminate in an overwhelming aversion to anything to do with learning, and an eventual belief that they are incapable of learning anything of value. The short-term consequences of such notions have been detailed in this thesis; however, the long-term costs are not so readily discerned. Perhaps, the effects are apparent, but we continue to ignore them. Daily, our televisions and newspapers provide distressing evidence of how people and communities are disrupted, disabled and decimated by irresponsible and uncaring individuals and communities of individuals. Yet, we continue to ignore the fact that schooling in all its guises is in any way culpable. Perhaps this thesis provides an indication that it is time to discontinue such denial and to face up to the critical ways that education does not work.

A Personal Reflection

> Inquiry is not so much thinking about answers, although the questioning will produce a lot more thoughts that look like answers. It really involves just listening to the thinking that your questioning invokes, as if you were sitting by the side of the stream of your own thoughts, listening to the water flow over and around the rocks, listening, listening, and watching the occasional leaf or twig as it is carried along. (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 233)

When I consider the personal value of this interpretive inquiry, it lies in what it reveals to me about the power of listening. In a very personal sense I have come to realize the benefits that accrue when, as a teacher, I learn to listen to children, to what they say, to what they intend, to what they imagine, and to what they experience in their daily interactions within the school. I have also learned that when I listen to myself I come to a heightened awareness of my own prejudices and biases, my mistaken and misdirected assumptions, and the effect my talk and my actions have upon the way my students think about themselves and their learning. It seems to me that interpretive inquiry is very much a process of being immersed in the stream of your own thoughts. The meanings that we discover from these thoughts are very much dependent upon how we look and how we listen, and this in many ways defines the extent to which we learn.

REFERENCES

Adams, M. J. (1990). Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning about Print. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Adams & Burns (1999). "Connecting Student Learning & Technology." [On-line] Available at http://edrs.com/Webstore/Detail.CFM?Ednumber=ED428759

Alberta Education (1989). Elementary Program of Studies. Edmonton: Government of Alberta.

Allington, R. L. & Walmsley, S. A. (1995). No Quick Fix: Rethinking Literacy Programs in America's Elementary Schools. New York: Teachers College Press.

Ames, C. & Ames, R. (Eds.). (1989). Research on Motivation in Education. San Diego, CA: Academic Press Inc.

Anyon, J. (1981). Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work. In H. A. Giroux, A. N. Penna & W. F. Pinar, (Eds.), Curriculum and Instruction: Alternatives in Education. Berkeley, CA: McCutchan Pub. Corp.

Apple, M. W. & King, N. R. (1977). "What Do Schools Teach?" Curriculum Inquiry 6(4): 341 - 358.

Armstrong, M. (1981). Closely Observed Children: The Diary of a Primary Classroom. Chesterfield, MA: Chameleon Education Services.

Bainbridge, J. & Malicky, G. (2000). Constructing Meaning: Balancing Elementary Language Arts. Toronto, Canada: Harcourt Brace.

Bamberger, J. (1991). The Laboratory for Making Things: Developing Multiple Representations of Knowledge. In D.Schön (Ed.), The Reflective Turn: Case Studies In and On Educational Practice. New York: Teachers College Press.

Bempechat, J. (1998). Against the Odds: How "At-Risk" Children Exceed Expectations. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Biggs, A.P. & Edwards, V. (1994). 'I Treat Them All The Same' Teacher-Pupil Talk In Multiethnic Classrooms. In D. Graddol, J. Maybin, & B. Steirer (Eds.), Researching Language and Literacy in Social Context. Clevendon, UK: The Open University.

Binkley, M. R., Phillips, L. M. & Norris, S. P. (1995). Creating a Measure of Reading Instruction. In . M. Binkley, K. Rust, & M. Winglee (Eds.), Methodological Issues in Comparative Educational Studies Washington, DC: Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

Bogdan, R. C. & Biklen, S. K. (1992). Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Bogdan, R.C. & Biklen, S. K. (1998). Qualitative Research in Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Boostrom, R. (1994). "Learning to Pay Attention." Qualitative Studies in Education 7(1): 51 - 64.

Bowers, C. A. (1974). Cultural Literacy for Freedom. Eugene, OR: Elan Publishers Inc.

Bowers, C. A. & Flinders, D. J. (1990). Responsive Teaching: An Ecological Approach to Classroom Patterns of Language, Culture, and Thought. New York: Teachers College Press.

Brooks, J. & Brooks, M. (1993). In Search of Understanding: The Case for Constructivist Classrooms. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Caine, R. & Caine, G. (1994). Making Connections: Teaching and the Human Brain. Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley Innovative Learning Publications.

Caine, R. & Caine, G. (1997). Education on the Edge of Possibility. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Carson, T. & Sumara, D. (Eds.). (1997). Action Research as a Living Practice. New York: Peter Lang.

Cazden, C. (1988). Classroom Discourse: The Language of Teaching and Learning. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books.

Chall, J. (1967). Learning to Read: The Great Debate: An Inquiry into the Science, Art, and Ideology of Old and New Methods of Teaching Children to Read, 1910-1965. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Cherryholmes, C. (1988). Power and Criticism: Poststructural Investigations in Education. New York: Teachers College Press.

Christensen, P. & James, A., (Eds.). (2000). Research with Children: Perspectives and Practices. London: Falmer Press.

Christie, F. (1995). "Pedagogic Discourse in the Primary School." Linguistics and Education 7: 221-242.

Clark, E.T., Jr. (1988). "Believing is Seeing—Not the Reverse." A Quarterly Journal of Philosophy, Science, Religion and the Arts **Autumn**: 49 - 57.

Cleary, L. (1991). "Affect and Cognition in the Writing Processes of Eleventh Graders." Written Communication 8(4): 473 - 508.

Connelly, M. & Clandinin, J. (1993). Teachers as Curriculum Planners: Narratives of Experience. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Cook-Gumperz, J. Corsaro, W. & Streeck, J. (Eds.). (1986). Children's Worlds and Children's Language. New Babylon: Mouton de Gruyter.

Corsaro, W. (1997). The Sociology of Childhood. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.

Covey, S. (1989). The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Crowley, S. (1989). A Teacher's Introduction to Deconstruction. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Cummins, J. (1989). Empowering Minority Students. Sacramento, CA: California Association for Bilingual Education.

Cummins, J. (1993). Empowering Minority Students: A Framework for Intervention. In L. Weis, & M. Fine (Eds.), Beyond Silenced Voices: Class, Race and Gender in United States Schools. New York: SUNY Press.

Dale, G.A. (1996). "Existential Phenomenology: Emphasizing the Experience of the Athlete in Sport Psychology Research." The Sport Psychologist(10): 307 - 321.

Davis, B., Sumara, D. & Luce-Kepler, R. (2000). Engaging Minds: Learning and Teaching in a Complex World. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

Delpit, L. (1992). "Acquisition of Literate Discourse: Bowing before the Master?" Theory into Practice **31**(4): 296-302.

Delpit, L. (1993). The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children. In L. Weis & M. Fine (Eds.), Beyond Silenced Voices: Class, Race, and Gender in United States Schools. New York: SUNY Press.

Donaldson, M. (1978). Children's Minds. Guildford, UK: Biddles Ltd.

Edelsky, C. (1994). "Education for Democracy." Language Arts **71**(April): 252 - 257.

Eisner, E. (1985). Aesthetic Modes of Knowing. In E. Eisner (Ed.), Learning and Teaching the Ways of Knowing. Chicago: The National Society for the Study of Education.

Ellis, J. (1998). Teaching from Understanding: Teacher as Interpretive Inquirer. New York: Garland Publishing Inc.

Emig, J. (1971). The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders. Urbana, IL: NCTE.

Fang, Z. (1996). "What Counts in Good Writing? A Case Study of Relationships Between Teachers' Beliefs and Student Conceptions." Reading Horizons **36**(3): 249 - 257.

Fine, A. & Sandstrom, K. (1988). Knowing Children: Participant Observation with Minors. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications Inc.

Fine, M. (1987). "Silencing in Public Schools." Language Arts **64**(2): 157-174.

Fish, S. (1980). Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Freire, P. (1970). Pedagogy of the Oppressed. New York: Seabury Press.

Gadamer, H-G. (1990). Truth and Method. New York: Crossroad.

Gee, J.P. (1989). "Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics: Introduction." Journal of Education **171**(1): 5 - 17.

Gibson, R. (1984). Structuralism and Education. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

Gibson, M. A. & Ogbu, J. U. (1991). Minority Status and Schooling: A Comparative Study of Immigrant and Involuntary Minorities. New York: Garland Publishing.

Giroux, H. A. (1983). Theory & Resistance In Education: A Pedagogy for the Opposition. South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey Publishers, Inc.

Goetz, J. P. & LeCompte, M. D. (1984). Ethnography and Qualitative Design in Educational Research. Orlando, FL: Academic Press.

Goodman, K. S. & Goodman, Y. M. (1979). Learning to Read Is Natural. In L. B. Resnick, & P. A. Weaver, (Eds.), Theory and Practice of Early Reading. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Graue, E. M. & Walsh, D. J. (1995). Children in Context: Interpreting the Here and Now of Children's Lives. In J. A. Hatch (Ed.), Qualitative Research in Early Childhood Settings. Westport, CN: Praeger.

Graue, E. M. & Walsh, D. J., (Eds.). (1998). Studying Children in Context: Theories, Methods, and Ethics. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Graves, D. H. (1983). Writing: Teachers and Children at Work. Exeter, NH: Heinemann Educational Books.

Graves, M., van der Broek, P. & Taylor, B. (Eds.). (1996). The First R: Every Child's Right to Read. New York: Teachers College Press.

Graves, M. F., Juel, C. & Graves, B. B. (1998). Teaching Reading in the 21st Century. Boston, MA, Allyn and Bacon.

Green, J. & Chandler, S. (1990). Implementation: Toward a Dialog About Implementation Within the Conceptual Cycle of Inquiry. In E. Guba (Ed.), The Paradigm Dialog. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Greig, A. & Taylor, J. (1999). Doing Research with Children. London: SAGE Publications.

Guba, E. (1990). The Paradigm Dialog. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Guba, E. (1981). "Criteria for Assessing the Trustworthiness of Naturalistic Studies." Educational Communication and Technology 29(2).

Guthrie, J. T. (1996). "Educational contexts for engagement in literacy." The Reading Teacher 49(6): 432-444.

Hammersley, M. (1990). Classroom Ethnography. Milton Keynes, UK: Open University Press.

Harste, J. C., Woodward, V. A. & Burke, C. L. (1984). Language Stories and Literacy Lessons. Portsmouth. NH: Heinemann Educational Books Inc.

Hart, S. (1998). Double Vision: Negotiating the Roles of Teacher and Researcher. Teaching from Understanding: Teacher as Interpretive Inquirer. Ellis, J. L., (Ed.) New York: Garland Publishing Inc.

Hatch, J. A. (1988). Young Children as Informants in Classroom Studies. Annual Ethnography in Research Forum, Philadelphia, PA.

Hatch, J. A. (1995). Studying Childhood as a Cultural Invention: A Rationale and Framework. Qualitative Research in Early Childhood Settings. Hatch, J. A., (Ed.), Westport. CN: Praeger.

Healy, J. M. (1990). Endangered Minds: Why Children Don't Think and What We Can Do About It. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Heath, S.B. (1983). Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Hern, M. (1996). Kids, Community, and Self-Design: An Introduction. Deschooling Our Lives. Hern, M. (Ed.), Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society Publishers.

Hesch, Rick (2000). "Mass Testing and the Underdevelopment of Inner-City Communities." The Alberta Journal of Educational Research XLVI(1): 49-64.

Holdaway, D. (1979). The Foundations of Literacy. Sydney, Australia: Ashton Scholastic.

Holt, J. (1964). How Children Fail. New York: Pitman Publishing Corporation.

Holt, J. (1967). How Children Learn. New York: Pitman Publishing Corporation.

Hoover, Linda (1994). "Reflective Writing as a Window on Preservice Teachers' Thought Processes." Teaching and Teacher Education 10(1): 83 - 93.

Hudson-Ross, S., Cleary, L.M. & Casey, M. (1993). Children's Voices: Children Talk About Literacy. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Hutchison, S. & Wilson, H. (1994). Research and Therapeutic Interviews: A Poststructuralist Perspective. In J. Morse (Ed.), Issues in Qualitative Research Methods. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Illich, Ivan (1996). Deschooling Society: In M. Hern (Ed.), Deschooling Our Lives. Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society Publishers.

Janesick, Valerie (1998). The Dance of Qualitative Research Design: Metaphor, Methodolatry, and Meaning. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

James, A. (1999). Researching Children's Social Competence. In M. Woodhead, D. Faulkner & K. Littelton (Eds.), Making Sense of Social Development. London, Routledge.

Jardine, David (1988). "There Are Children All Around Us." Journal of Educational Thought 22(2A): 178 - 186.

Jarolimek, J. & Foster, C. D. Sr. (1997). Teaching and Learning in the Elementary School. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill.

John-Roger and McWilliams, P (1991). Life 101: Everything We Wish We Had Learned About Life In School - But Didn't. Los Angeles, CA: Prelude Press.

Johnson, D. & Johnson, R. (1991). Learning Together and Alone. Engelwood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall

Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., Holubec, E. J. & Roy, P. (1984). Circles of Learning: Cooperation in the Classroom, Newark, NJ: ASCD.

Kabat-Zinn, J. (1994). Wherever You Go There You Are. New York: Hyperion.

Kirova-Petrova, Anna (2000). "Researching Young Children's Lived Experiences of Loneliness: Pedagogical Implications for Linguistically Diverse Students." Alberta Journal of Educational Research XLVI(2): 99 - 116.

Klein, E., Kantor, R. & Fernie, D. (1988). "What Do Young Children Know About School?" Young Children (July): 32 - 39.

Knapp, M. S. and Associates (1995). Teaching for Meaning in High-Poverty Classrooms. New York: Teachers College Press.

Knupfer, A.M. (1996). "Ethnographic studies of children: the difficulties of entry, rapport, and presentations of their worlds." Qualitative Studies In Education 9(2): 135-149.

Kvale, S. (1996). InterViews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Lachman, S. J. (1999) Learning is a Process: Toward an Improved Definition of Learning. [On-line] Available at http://www.ehost@epnet.com

Langer, E. J. & Park, K. (1990). Incompetence: A Conceptual Reconsideration. In R. J. Sternberg, & J. J. Kolligan (Eds.), Competence Considered. New Haven, CN: Yale University Press.

Langer, E., Bashner, R.S. & Chanowitz B. (1985). "Decreasing Prejudice by Increasing Discrimination." Journal of Personality and Social Psychology **49**: 113 - 120.

Langer, E. (1989). Mindfulness. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing.

Langer, E. (1997). The Power of Mindful Learning. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing.

Lauritzen, C. & Jaeger, M. (1997). Integrating Learning Through Story: The Narrative Curriculum. Albany, NY: Delmar Publishers.

Lemlech, J. K. (1998). Curriculum and Instructional Methods for the Elementary and Middle School. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill.

Leroy, C. (1995). Opposition and Literacy Among Girls in an Inner-City Classroom. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Edmonton, University of Alberta, Canada.

Leroy, Carol (1999). "Revisiting Resistance: Girls' Interaction and Literacy in an Inner-City Classroom." Journal of Thought **34**(1): 51-64.

Levin, J. (1993). "Estimating the value of a knowledge Base for School Learning." Review of Educational Research **63**(3): 335 - 343.

Lincoln, Y. S. & Guba, E. G. (1985). Naturalistic Inquiry. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

Madison, G. B. (1988). "Hermeneutical Integrity: A Guide for the Perplexed." Market Process **6**(1): 2 - 8.

Manning, K. (1997). "Authenticity in Constructivist Inquiry: Methodological Considerations Without Prescription." Qualitative Inquiry **3**(1): 93 - 115.

Masten, Ann S. (1994). Resilience in Individual Development: Successful Adaptation Despite Risk and Adversity. In M. C. Wang & E. W. Gordon (Eds.) Educational Resilience in Inner-City America: Challenges and Prospects. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Maynes, W. (1990). The Education of Edmonton's Urban Poor: A Policy Perspective. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Edmonton, University of Alberta, Canada.

Maynes, W. (1996). "Inner city education in the world of the New Right." The Canadian School Executive **November**, 12 - 18.

McIntyre, J. (1998). The Role of Student-Teacher Dialogue Journals in Building Language and Establishing Community. In J. Ellis (Ed.), Teaching from Understanding: Teacher as Interpretive Inquirer. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc.

McKay, R.A. & Kendrick, M.E. (1999). "Young children draw their images of literacy." The Reading Professor 22(1): 8 - 34.

McNiff, J. (1998). Personal Communication.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary. (1999). [On-line] Available at http://www.m-w.com/netdict.htm

Millard, E. (1997). Differently Literate: Boys, Girls and the Schooling of Literacy. London, UK: The Falmer Press.

Morse, J. M. (1994). "Emerging From the Data": The Cognitive Processes of Analysis in Qualitative Inquiry. In J. M. Morse (Ed.), Critical Issues in Qualitative Research Methods. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Myers, C. & Simpson, D. (1998). Re-Creating Schools: Places Where Everyone Learns and Likes It. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press Inc.

Newkirk, T. (1996). Seduction and Betrayal in Qualitative Research. In P. Mortensen & G. E. Kirsch (Eds.), Ethics and Representation in Qualitative Studies of Literacy. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English

Noddings, N. (1995). "Teaching Themes of Care." Phi Delta Kappan 76(9): 675-79.

Novak, M. (1978). Ascent of the Mountain, Flight of the Dove. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers.

Nuthall, G. (1999a). "How Students Learn: The Validation Model of Knowledge Acquisition." [On-line] Available at http://edrs.com/Webstore/Detail.CFM?Ednumber=ED431801

Nuthall, G. (1999b). "The Way Students Learn: Acquiring Knowledge from an Integrated Science and Social Studies Unit." Elementary School Journal 99(4): 303 - 341.

O'Kane, C. (2000). The Development of Participatory Techniques. In P. Christensen & A. James (Eds.), Research with Children" Perspectives and Practices. London: Falmer Press.

Ogbu, J. U. (1978). Minority Education and Caste: The American System in Cross-Cultural Perspective. New York: Academic Press.

Ogbu, J. U. (1991). Low School Performance as and Adaptation: The Case of Blacks in Stockton, California. In M. A. Gibson & J. U. Ogbu (Eds.), Minority Status and Schooling: A Comparative Study of Immigrant and Involuntary Minorities. New York: Garland Publishing Inc.

Osborne, J. (2000). A new agenda for science education: Science as practised or science appreciated? Presentation to Centre for Literacy, University of Alberta.

Packer, M. J. & Addison, R. B. (1989). Entering the Circle. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Paley, V. (1979). White Teacher. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Paley, V. (1996). Talking to Myself in a Daily Journal: Reflections of a Kindergarten Teacher. In C. P. Casanave & S. Schecter (Eds.), On Becoming a Language Educator. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Palincsar, A, & McPhail, J. (1993). "A Critique of the Metaphor of Distillation in 'Toward a Knowledge Base for School Learning.'" Review of Educational Research **63**(3): 327 - 334.

Pearson, D. (1996). Reclaiming the Center. In M. Graves et al. (Eds., The First R: Every Child's Right to Read. New York: Teachers College Press.

Pelletier, Kenneth, R. (1994). Sound Mind, Sound Body: A New Model for Lifelong Health. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Perkins, D (1992). Smart Schools: From Training Memories to Educating Minds. New York: The Free Press.

Peshkin, Alan (1993). "The Goodness of Qualitative Research." Educational Researcher **22**(2): 23-29.

Peterson, S. & Bainbridge, J. (1999). "Teachers' gendered expectations and their evaluation of student writing." Reading Research and Instruction **38**(3): 255 - 271.

Phelan, A. (1994). "Unmasking Metaphors of Management: A Pedagogy of Collaborative Deconstruction." Teaching Education **6**(1): 104 -111.

Pianta, R.C. & Walsh, D. J. (1996). High-Risk Children in Schools. New York: Routledge.

Polkinghorne, D. (1983). Methodology for the Human Sciences: Systems of Inquiry. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Polkinghorne, D.E. (1988). Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Procinsky, U. (2000). Affirming Equity of Educational Opportunity in Schools: Parallel Lives of Principals. Unpublished doctoral thesis proposal, Edmonton: University of Alberta, Canada.

Proctor, J. R. (1986). The Effect of Teachers' Beliefs on Grade One Writing. Unpublished masters thesis, Edmonton: University of Alberta, Canada.

Rigsby, L. C. (1994). The Americanization of Resilience: Deconstructing Research Practice. In M.C. Wand & E. W. Gordon (Eds.), Educational Resilience in Inner-City America: Challenges and Prospects. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Rist, R. (1978). The Invisible Children: School Integration in American Society. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Salz, A. (1992). "Brother, Can You Spare a Paradigm? Quantum Mechanics and the First Grade Reading Test." Theory Into Practice **31**(2): 107 - 115.

Sanders, S. (1996). "Children's Physical Education Experiences: Their Interpretations Can Help Teachers." JOPERD **67**(3).

Schoenfeld, A. (1989). "Explorations of Students' Mathematical Beliefs and Behavior." Journal for Research in Mathematics Education **20**(4): 338 - 355.

Schommer, M. & Walker, K. (1995). "Are Epistemological Beliefs Similar across Domains?" Journal of Educational Psychology **87**(3): 424 - 432.

Schön, Donald (1987). Educating the Reflective Practitioner:. San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishers.

Schön, Donald (1991). The Reflective Turn: Case Studies In and On Educational Practice. New York: Teachers College Press.

Shulman, L. S. & Carey, N. B. (1984). "Psychology and the Limitations of Individual Rationality: Implications for the Study of Reasoning and Civility." Review of Educational Research **54**(4): 501 - 524.

Scott, D. & Usher, R. (1999). Researching Education: Data, Methods, and Theory in Educational Enquiry. London: Cassell.

Scott, Jacqueline (2000). Children as Respondents: The Challenge for Quantitative Methods. In P. Christensen & A. James (Eds.), Research with Children: Perspectives and Practices. London: Falmer Press.

Seidman, I.E. (1998). Interviewing as Qualitative Research. New York: Teachers College Press.

Siegert, Michael (1986). Adult Elicited Child Behavior: The Paradox of Measuring Social Competence Through Interviewing. In J. Cook-Gumperrz et al. (Eds.), Children's Worlds and Children's Language. New Babylon: Mouton de Gruyter.

Singer, Judith (1993). "On Faith and Microscopes: Methodological Lenses for Learning About Learning." Review of Educational Research **63**(3): 353 - 364.

Smith, D. (1991). Hermeneutic Inquiry: The Hermeneutic Imagination and the Pedagogic Text. Forms of Curriculum Inquiry. Short, E., (Ed.), New York: SUNY Press.

Smith, D. (1997). Interpreting Educational Reality. Hermeneutics and Educational Discourse. Danner, H., (Ed.), Johannesburg, SA: Heinemann.

Smith, J. K. (1990). Goodness Criteria: Alternative Research Paradigms and the Problem of Criteria. In E. Guba (Ed.), The Paradigm Dialog. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Smith, J. K. (1992). "Interpretive Inquiry: A Practical and Moral Activity." Theory Into Practice **31**(2): 100 - 106.

Smith, J. K. (1993a). After the Death of Empiricism: The Problem of Judging Social and Educational Inquiry. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation.

Smith, J. K. (1993b). Hermeneutics and Qualitative Inquiry. In D. Flinders & G. Mills (Eds.), Theory and Concepts in Qualitative Research. New York: Teachers College Press.

Spiegel, D. (1998). "Silver Bullets, Babies and Bath Water: Literature Response Groups in a Balanced Literacy Program." Reading Teacher **52**(2): 114 - 125.

Spradley, J. P. (1979). The Ethnographic Interview. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Sternberg, R.J. & Caruso, D. R. (1985). Practical Modes of Knowing. In E. Eisner (Ed.), Learning and Teaching the Ways of Knowing. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Sumara, D. J. & Davis, B. (1997). Enlarging the Space of Possibility: Complexity, Complicity, and Action Research Practices. In T. R. Carson & D. J. Sumara (Eds.), Action Research as a Living Practice. New York: Peter Lang.

Thorne, Barrie (1993). Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Thornton, L. & McEntee, M. (1995). "Learner Centered Schools as a Mindset, and the Connection With Mindfulness and Multiculturalism." Theory Into Practice **34**(4): 250 - 257.

Thurber, Kathleen (2000). "Nursing prof shines new light on depression." [On-line] Available at http://www.ualberta.ca/ExpressNews/news/2000/090100.htm

Thurman, Robert (1998). Inner Revolution: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Real Happiness. New York: Riverhead Books.

van Kraayenoord, C. & Paris, S. (1997). "Australian Students' Self-Appraisal of Their Work Samples and Academic Progress." Elementary School Journal **97**(5): 523 - 537.

van Manen, M. (1993). The Tact of Teaching. London, ON: The Althouse Press.

Waksler, Frances (1996). The Little Trials of Childhood and Children's Strategies for Dealing with Them. London: The Falmer Press.

Wang, M.C. & Gordon, E. W., (Eds.). (1994). Educational Resilience in Inner-City America: Challenges and Prospects. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

Wang, M. C., Haertel, G. D., & Walberg, H. (1993). "Toward a Knowledge Base for School Learning." Review of Educational Research **63**(3): 249 - 294.

Wang, M. C., Haertel, G. D., & Walberg, H. J. (1998). "Educational Resilience." [On-line] Available at http://www.temple.edu/LSS/pub98-11.htm.

Watts, S. M. (1996). Improving Literacy Instruction and Assessment for All Children. In M. Graves et al. (Eds.) The First R Every Child's Right to Read. New York, Teachers College Press.

Weber, S. (1986). "The Nature of Interviewing." Phenomenology and Pedagogy **45**(2): 65 - 72.

Weinstein, R. S. (1989). Perceptions of Classroom Processes and Student Motivation: Children's Views of Self-fulfilling Prophecies. In C. Ames & R. Ames (Eds.), Research On Motivation In Education. San Diego, CA: Academic Press Inc.

Woods, P. (1990). The Happiest Days? How Pupils Cope with School. London: The Falmer Press.

Yin, R.K. (1994). Case Study Research: Design and Methods. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A
Request and Consent Form

John Proctor, B.Ed. M.Ed.
7850 Jasper Ave.
Edmonton, T5H 3R9

492 - 4273 ext. 272 (office) 424 - 5249 (home)

Date:

Dear ________________________,

I am a graduate student at the University of Alberta who is interested in doing research into how students think about learning. As part of this research, I would like your permission to talk with your child about his or her learning. The conversations will be very general and will focus entirely on the students' personal views of how they learn, what they feel best helps them to learn, and how important learning in school is for them. I will tape-record and transcribe our discussions so that I can review and analyze what we have talked about. This is to make sure that I have accurately captured the students' ideas and opinions. I will also be writing to and with the students about their learning. This writing will not be evaluated or marked in any way. We will use it only to exchange ideas.

I will plan these interviews and discussions so that they don't interfere with the students' regular classroom work. At all times I will ensure that the school, the teacher and the students remain anonymous, and all of the data I gather is kept strictly confidential and discussed only with my University of Alberta supervisor, Dr. Grace Malicky (492 - 3751). In addition, every aspect of this research will be subject to the University ethics guidelines which ensure that the interests of the students in the project are protected. Once the research is completed, all of the tape recordings will be erased and I will dispose of all records that may be identified with individual students. The information gathered from this research will be written up by me in my doctoral dissertation and may be shared later with other educators in articles and presentations.

Your child's participation in this research is voluntary and the project will not interfere with your child's regular learning program in any way. You may also withdraw your child from the project at any time. From my experiences with students in the past, I have found that they enjoy having the opportunity to share and discuss their ideas. They also learn much about themselves and their learning and so this project has the potential to be of immediate benefit for the students who take part.

I am requesting your permission for your child to take part in this project.

Yours sincerely,

John Proctor

Research Project Consent Form

Parent/Guardian name: ______________________________

I understand that: (please check)

- All conversations/interviews will focus solely on my child's personal views on learning ____

- My child may withdraw from the research project at any time without penalty _____

- All information gathered will be discussed only with the researcher's supervisor _____

- Any information that identifies my child will be destroyed when the research is complete _____

- My child will not be identified in any documents resulting from this research ________.

I also understand that the results of this research will be used only in: (please check)

- the researcher's doctoral dissertation ______.
- presentations and written articles for other educators ______.

I, ____________________________________, hereby consent
(name of parent/legal guardian)

for ____________________________________ to:
(name of student)

be interviewed individually ______

take part in group discussions _______

be tape recorded ______

write to and with the researcher______

Signature of Parent/Legal Guardian: ______________________________

Date signed:______________________________

Thank you for taking the time to consider my request

John Proctor 424 - 5249 (Home) or 492 - 4273 ext 272 (University of Alberta)

APPENDIX B

Possible first interview/conversation prompts:

(adapted from Ellis, 1998)

- Tell me about the person who has made the biggest difference in your learning
- Pick one thing that worries you quite a bit and tell me about it…..
- Share one thing that really puzzles you - about school, people, about life in general
- Tell me about some of the things you would like to accomplish this year…
- Share some things that you like to do in your spare time…
- I'm trying to figure out if students learn in different ways – can you help me with this idea?
- Tell me about the person who helps you the most in school – how do they do they help?
- Some people believe that willpower is very powerful – what's your opinion?
- I'm trying to understand why some things really bother me and some don't … any idea that might help me to understand?
- Some people are very competitive – how do you feel about this?

Sample of Invitations

(Adapted from Schoenfeld, 1991)

- When I get a good grade it's because…..
- I know that I've learned something when ….
- The kids who are the best learners in our class …
- When I've learned something it means that ….
- I learn best when ….
- The hardest part of learning for me is …..
- This year I:

  am in the (top, middle, lowest) group
  expect to get good marks
  expect to have an easy time with what we have to learn
  will probably have problems with …

- Learning in school is important because …

APPENDIX C

Focus for second round conversations

I really enjoyed talking with you in our first round—this time I would like to discuss with you some of the activities that you do in class and how they help you to learn.

Midsummer Night's Dream experience

- What was the best part of the doing the Midsummer Night's Dream?
- How easy was it to memorize and act out your part?
- How did you think the play presentation went?
- Would you want to do it again?
- What did you learn about yourself?
- What advice would you give to the actors that might make this experience more enjoyable for you and other students?

Oral reading in class

- How do you like reading around – being told when to read by the teacher etc..?
- Does this help you with your reading? If not, why not?
- How would you prefer to read a story in class? Why?
- What is the purpose for doing the activities after you have read the story? Do these help you to learn to read?
- What did you learn from doing the book (report) sharing poster?

Being read to:

- Did you enjoy having *Tuck Everlasting* read to you?
- What was the best part of this experience?
- Does it help when the teacher explains the story as she reads?
- Why do teachers ask questions as they read? (For example: "What does …. Think is going to happen? Why is she afraid?" etc.)
- Any suggestions for teachers when they read to a class?

Assignments and "Tests"

Let's talk about the last writing assignment - writing for the movie director

- How did you do on the assignment?

- Were you sure of what you were supposed to do on this assignment?
- What did you find to be the most difficult part of the assignment?
- Or – What is the biggest challenge you have when writing one of these tests?
- What are two things that teachers can do that would help you with your writing right now?

The Science Test on Flight

- How did you do on this test?
- If you had a choice would you rather do a multiple choice test or a writing assignment?
- What do you do if you don't know which answer to choose on the test?

Creating the flight questions - (You have spent quite a lot of time on the Flight Unit…)

- Why is it important to learn about principles of flight?
- What are some of the principles?
- How does it help you to create the questions?
- What is a "thinking" question?
- Did making up the flight questions help you?
- Did you study for the test and did it help?

Spelling time and practice

- How does the spelling lesson help you with your spelling?
- What's the most useful part of this activity?
- Is spelling important? How important do you feel it is?

The Shakespeare search on the Internet

- What was the best part of doing this?
- How easy was it?
- What did you learn? (About Shakespeare? About searching for information on the Internet?)

Classroom grouping arrangements

- How does the new U-shaped group help you as a learner?
- Does it have an advantage over the old system?
- What are some of them?
- The people at the end only have one partner is this an advantage or disadvantage?

The math consultant's class

- How was this math lesson different?
- What did you like about it most?
- What can you remember from the lesson?
  - What does is mean to take a chance
  - Which number is most likely to come up when you role two dice?
  - What's the difference between likely and certain?
- Are you looking forward to in the next lesson with Mrs. Morris? Why?

Class activities and assignments

- Is the purpose for the assignment or the class work always clear to you?
- Do you always know what you are supposed to be doing?
- If not, what how could Mr. T. make it clearer?

Motivation

- Sometimes some students appear to run out of gas? Any idea why this happens?
- Which lessons are most interesting for you?
- How much do you rely on your partner to help you understand what you have to do in an assignment?
- Mr. T. always says how important it is for you to listen – are the directions always clear? Are you always sure what you are supposed to be doing.
- Do you marks always reflect what you can really do?
- Or If you get a low mark do you always deserve it?
- Or If you get a low mark do you always understand why you got it?